



ORNITHOLOGY

Breeding marsh terns in France in 2025

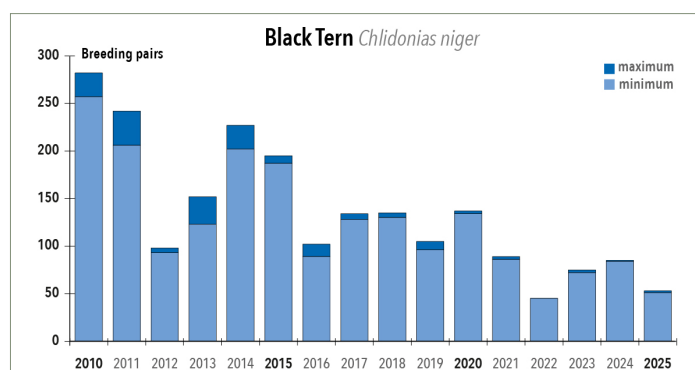
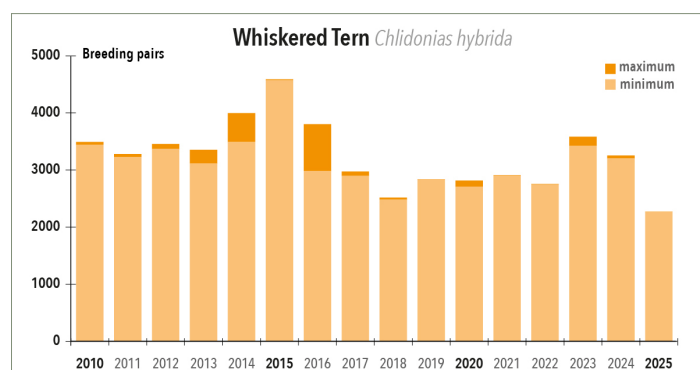
28 June 2026

By Jacques Trotignon



Whiskered Tern, pair, Brenne, May 2016 (© Michel Martinazzi)

Here are the results of the censuses of the three species of marsh terns breeding in France in 2025. To say that the situation is not looking good would be an understatement... and the heatwave currently sweeping through the country in the second ten days of June does not bode well for the 2026 breeding season. In 2025, the Whiskered Tern lost nearly a thousand pairs compared with 2024, reaching its lowest level since 2004; the Black Tern also experienced one of its worst years; and no White-winged Black Tern bred in France...



Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida*

In 2025, between 2,268 and 2,273 pairs of Whiskered Terns bred in France, which is nearly 1,000 pairs fewer than in 2024 (957 to be precise)! This figure is the lowest recorded since 2004, when the average number of breeding pairs was 2,178.

Whiskered Tern	Number of colonies	Number of pairs	%
Grand-Lieu Lake	?	944	42%
Brenne	9	429	19%
Sologne	5	329	14%
Brière	2	250	11%
Dombes	3	233	10%
Forez	1	30-35	2%
Marne	1	33	1%
Indre-et-Loire	2	20	1%
Total	> 23	2268-2273 (mean 2271)	100%

The decline in the number of pairs was seen in **Sologne** (329 pairs, 183 fewer than in 2024, with some 112 pairs having abandoned their nests during the breeding season) and, above all, the **Brière** (250 pairs, 1,115 fewer than in 2024), whilst **Grand-Lieu Lake** recorded an increase of 363 pairs, bringing the total to 944 pairs, which accounts for 42% of the national total. It is known that these two areas of Loire-Atlantique, separated only by the Loire estuary, regularly experience exchanges in population from year to year; however, it should be emphasised that in 2024, Grand-Lieu Lake and the Brière together totalled 1,946 pairs, whereas in 2025 the combined total is only 1,194 pairs. It is therefore clearly the regional population of Loire-Atlantique that is being affected. In Grande Brière Mottière, we are simultaneously observing the abandonment of the vast wild marshes that have historically made this wetland famous, and the settlement of birds in more heavily frequented peri-urban or port-side areas.

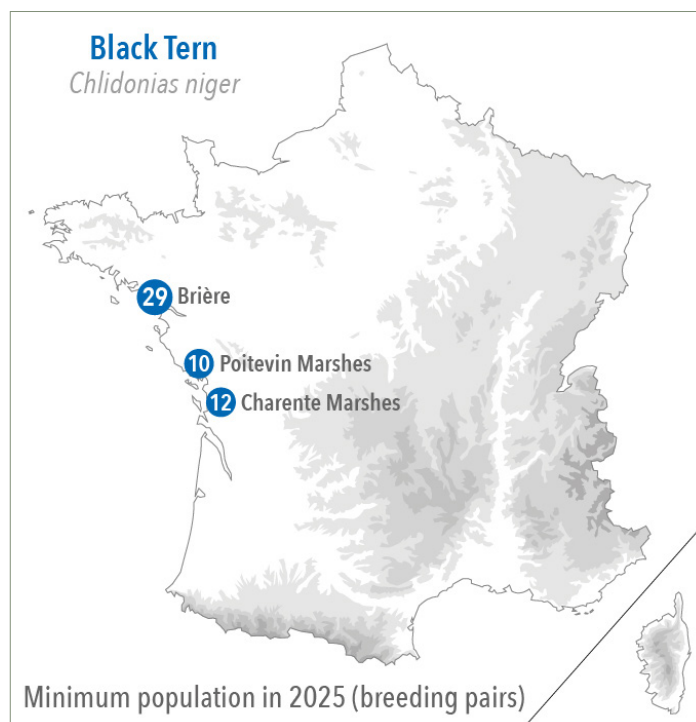
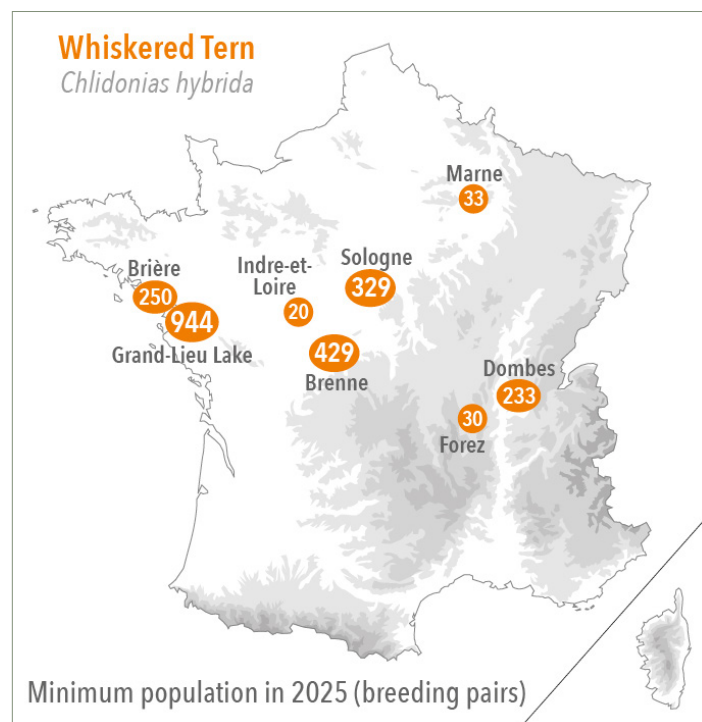
The number of colonies has also declined locally, as in **Sologne** (5 colonies compared with 8 in 2024) and in **Brenne** (9 colonies, totalling 429 pairs, instead of 13 in 2024). It should also be noted that, in the latter region, some 300 pairs abandoned four colonies for unexplained reasons, one of which contained 235 pairs and dozens of nests with eggs, all on a protected pond. In the **Dombes**, on the other hand, whilst a decline in the number of colonies was also observed, these colonies nonetheless comprised 233 pairs – more than in 2024, when five colonies totalled just 195 pairs. These contrasting patterns did not affect **Indre-et-Loire**, where two colonies totalled 20 pairs, nor the **Marne**, where 33 pairs once again bred amongst the water lilies on the Étang des Landres. In the **Forez**, only one colony was observed, comprising between 30 and 35 pairs.



Whiskered Tern, adult and chicks, Romania, July 2024 (© Toby Carter)

As regards breeding success, the number of fledglings was low at Grand-Lieu Lake, probably around 300–400. It appears that many birds lingered at the site for a long time without even attempting to breed (perhaps due to failures elsewhere?), with a total of nearly 4,000 adults observed on several occasions during the season. In contrast, in Brière, chick productivity is very good, thanks to the effective protection provided by the water primrose thickets sheltering the nests.

In Brenne, the vegetation hosting the colonies remains natural and comprises four types: water lily beds (62% of nests), water lilies associated with vegetation resulting from the previous year's drying-up of the ponds (19%), post-drying-up vegetation alone (10%) and baldingère (9%). For the first time, no pairs have settled on clumps of yellow water lilies. The damage caused by the Louisiana red crayfish to the vegetation in the ponds is to blame and is proving a serious cause for concern for the future, even in nature reserves... The Sologne region has not yet been affected by the proliferation of this crayfish, and the vegetation supporting the colonies remains varied: rushes, sedges, water-crowfoot, water lilies, as well as water primrose, which is home to 86 pairs. In the Dombes, the black terns also occupy stands of water-crowfoot, rushes and both species of water lily.



Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*

It has also been a poor year for the Black Tern, whose population numbered just 51–52 breeding pairs in 2025 – a figure close to that of the worst year on record, namely 2022 with its 45 pairs! Need we remind you that this bird can be considered on the brink of extinction in our country? And how can one not smile (with sadness) when one realises that this did not prevent the Brière, France's main nesting site, from being awarded the UNESCO 'Biosphere Reserve' designation in 2025?!

Black Tern	Number of colonies	Number of pairs	%
Brière	2	29-30	58%
Charente Marshes	2	12	23%
Poitevin Marshes	1	10	19%
Total	4	51-52	100%

Only two sites close to one another, to the south of the Grande Brière Mottière (Loire-Atlantique), hosted a colony: one comprising 4–5 pairs, the other 25. The breeders occupied clumps of water primrose – fortunately, one might be tempted to say, as this vegetation at least enabled the eggs and chicks to escape predators. At Grand-Lieu Lake, a Black Tern's nest was observed, but it was abandoned before the eggs hatched.

In the Charente Marshes (Charente-Maritime), the two usual nesting sites (owned by the LPO) had good water levels in the spring thanks to the heavy rains in April. Dozens of rafts had been set up there to encourage the black terns to settle. In the Fouras marsh, nine nests were built, producing 15 fledglings. In the Voutron marsh, three nests resulted in five fledglings. There were no reported cases of predation on eggs or chicks, no doubt thanks to the adequate water levels, whilst the mild weather during the summer ensured the breeding season went smoothly, even though the number of pairs was slightly lower than in 2024 (15 pairs).

In the Poitevin Marshes (Vendée), the situation was quite different, as the 10 pairs that had settled – as in 2024 – on a flooded meadow in the Marais de la Vacherie Regional Nature Reserve were forced to abandon their nests in the middle of the chick-rearing period, due to a heatwave combined with strong easterly winds that raged for three weeks in June. In the end, only one chick was able to fledge... On top of this climatic setback came the disturbance caused by 100 to 200 immature white storks, which had come to catch Louisiana crayfish in the areas that remained flooded!



Black Tern, Spain, April 2016 (© Raino Kinnunen)

List of observers : **Dombes** – coord. M. Benmergui ; observers: M. Benmergui, L. Noally and P. Crouzier (LPO Ain). **Forez** – coord. E. Véricel (LPO Loire). **Sologne** : coord. F. Pelsy (Sologne Nature Environnement) ; observers: M. Mabilieu, M. and E. Sempé, F. Pelsy and C. Michel. **Brenne** : coord. L. Beau (RNN Chérine) ; observers: they come from various organisations (RNN Chérine, CEN Centre-Val de Loire, PNR Brenne, Indre Nature, the Departmental Hunting Federation, CPIE) or are volunteers (J. Deberge, J.-M. Pilorget, J. Trotignon and T. Williams). **Marais charentais** – coord. and observers: C. Egretiau et C. Goulevant (LPO). **Marais poitevin** – coord. and observer: V. Turpaud-Fizzala (LPO). **Brière** – coord. and observers: D. Montfort and A. Troffigué. **Lac de Grand-Lieu** – coord. and observer: S. Reeber (SNPN). **Indre-et-Loire** – coord. J. Présent. (LPO Centre-Val de Loire) ; observers: C. Delaleu, J.M. Feuillet, A.Hervé, N. Macaire and J. Présent. **Marne** – coord. et observer: V. Field (LPO Champagne-Ardenne).

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