



The Least Tern is endangered in California

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As their name would suggest, Least Terns are among the smallest of the 19 species of terns in the world. The California Least Tern is one of the twelve recognized subspecies of the Least (or "little") Tern. Three of these subspecies inhabit the United States.

At one time the beaches of southern California teemed with California Least Terns. Today the numbers are so depleted that this bird has been designated an endangered species by the California Fish and Game Commission and the Secretary of Interior.

Historically, the breeding range of this subspecies extended from Monterey Bay south to southern Baja California, Mexico. There are no reliable estimates of the original numbers of California Least Terns. In 1909, a colony of 600 nesting pairs was reported at Huntington Beach, Orange County, and as late as 1915, investigations showed that literally thousands of nesting pairs were using the beaches of Orange and San Diego counties. One colony of 1,000 nesting pairs occupied a three-mile stretch of beach in San Diego County. This was but one of many nesting colonies found along our beaches.

Since the turn of the century, there has been a gradual but continuous decline in their numbers. This decline is the result of the destruction of nesting and feeding areas by an

ever-increasing human population. In 1975, it was estimated that there were only 600 nesting pairs left along our coastline. In recent years these remaining birds have nested from San Francisco Bay to the Mexican border at about 25 sites, most of which are threatened by various developments.

Wherever they are seen, the terns are a delight to watch. The California Least Tern is an elegant little creature only nine inches long with a wing span of 20 inches. Its body is white and the wings are pale gray with black tips. In breeding plumage, the white forehead contrasts with the black cap on the head, and the bird's yellow bill has a black tip. Its legs are also yellow. These markings, the four-part call of birds on the breeding grounds, and the rapid wing-beat distinguish it from other terns in California.

The long narrow wings and rather broad forked tail suspend the bird in effortless flight. Whether hovering buoyantly or diving into the water after small fish, its every appearance is exquisite.

California Least Terns obtain their food primarily from shallow bays and estuaries and feed almost exclusively on small fish such as anchovy, top smelt, shiner perch, and killifish. Once a school of fish is found, the terns hover a moment and dive unerringly into the water, rising immediately with their prey.

Bird banding studies on the California Least Tern have not yet provided adequate information on their migratory habits. It is known that they appear on their breeding grounds from April through October, and nest from about late May through August. Terns tend to choose as nesting areas relatively flat expanses of sand, salt flat, or dried mud with little or no vegetation. The site must be near a lagoon or estuary that supports an adequate supply of small fish.

Intricate courtship displays precede nesting, and the presenting of fish to the mate is an important part of the courtship.

The birds breed in loose colonies. The nest is a shallow, round depression in the sand or dried mud, and the birds lay from one to four eggs with two or three in the typical clutch. Eggs are buffy in color and are splotched heavily with irregular purplish and brownish markings, which make them difficult to find even though the nests are made on bare ground.

Incubation begins with the laying of the first egg, and the young hatch on consecutive days. The eggs hatch after an incubation period of about 20-25 days, during which time the female does most of the incubating. By the second day after hatching, the chicks leave the nest and wander freely through the tern colony.

Parent birds bring fish to the rapidly growing chicks. When adults give warning calls, the well-camouflaged chicks hide or flatten against the ground. Young do not take to the air for three weeks and do not become proficient in catching fish until after they leave the breeding grounds. Thus, the parents continue to feed the young even while teaching them where to find a school of fish and how to catch their own food.

Considerable interest has been aroused in recent years over the plight of the California Least Tern. This interest has prompted some positive action toward protection and proper management.

As an endangered species, the California Least Tern is given full protection under state and federal laws. Steps are being taken to protect and enhance the few remaining, feeding, and breeding areas and to clean up and restore some that have been destroyed.

Development of a plan to coordinate programs for restoring the Least Tern to a non-endangered status is the responsibility of the California Least Tern Recovery Team. Team members, appointed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, are biologists who are knowledgeable about Least Tern biology and protection needs.

It will require a concerted effort and full cooperation from the general public, the Department of Fish and Game and other responsible governmental agencies if we are to protect and maintain the California Least Tern for all to see and enjoy.