

California Least Tern & Western Snowy Plover **DOCENT MANUAL**

Revised June 2022



California State Parks
Huntington State Beach
Least Tern Natural Preserve



Holly Fuhrer



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Welcome!

Thank you for participating in the Least Tern/Western Snowy Plover Docent Program at Huntington State Beach Least Tern Natural Preserve.

Program Goals:

The goal of the docent program is to assist in the protection of the breeding colony of California Least Terns and of the Western Snowy Plovers at the Huntington State Beach Least Tern Natural Preserve by promoting educational opportunities and increasing the level of awareness of beach users.

Specifically:

To protect and preserve the habitat of the California Least Tern and Western Snowy Plover at the Least Tern Natural Preserve.

To communicate information about the natural history and conservation of Least Terns, Snowy Plovers and their habitats.

To educate visitors of the importance of following guidelines which have been implemented to protect the plovers and terns.

Since 2004, this docent program has been successful at Huntington State Beach. From the beginning, feedback from docents has been helpful in its evolution. Please be vocal and active in your involvement, and we can all help create the most effective effort possible for these rare birds.

Acknowledgements:

The work of many groups up and down the California coast has contributed to refining techniques and materials used to protect these rare birds, but in particular, we have drafted heavily from the Snowy Plover Docent Manual, Coal Oil Point Reserve and Santa Barbara Audubon Society, Santa Barbara, CA, January 2003, the Channel Coast District Snowy Plover Project, and the California State Parks Western Snowy Plover Systemwide Management Guidelines, March 2002.

Introduction

The Huntington State Beach Least Tern Natural Preserve was established in 1973 as the first fully protected tern colony in California. At that time, there were approximately 700 pairs of this species remaining. The Preserve was originally ~1.5 acres, but has grown to its present configuration of 12.2 acres inside the chain link fence.

In Huntington Beach, California Least Terns have always nested in the area adjacent to the Santa Ana River. To address severe impacts to nesting success by people and dogs, California State Parks, with the help of Sea and Sage Audubon Society, originally erected fences around a small remnant colony of terns. Nesting success and the size of colony has grown over the years, with a low of 7 pairs in the early 1970s, to over 525 pairs nesting in 2003. As the colony has grown, so has the size of the fenced area. Today least terns nest almost exclusively within chain-link fenced area, although a pair or two will occasionally slip into the small space between the outer wooden slate fence and the chain-link fence. Protection provided by the fences has largely solved the direct destruction of nests by human traffic and dogs. But other predators, especially avian predators such as raptors, now pose an increased threat due to the closed-in nature of the preserve. Docents will be asked to help monitor for predators and when possible and take steps to discourage predators from the area.

The colony is located at the end of a very popular and often crowded beach (Exhibit 1). Here, the ocean is adjacent to the largest river in Orange County, the Santa Ana River, and maintains a high-quality surf break frequented by local surfers. Huntington State Beach is the #1 visited State Beach, receiving over 1 million visitors in the summer. It is both of these groups we are attempting to convince to slightly modify their behavior for the benefit of the two rare birds. Most of the response from the public has been positive from our docent outreach.

The beach, from wet sand to the front fence, has traditionally been used by loafing Least Terns and fledged terns. We hope the terns will not be flushed and that roosting and foraging plovers will not be disturbed with greater public awareness and education.

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Exhibit 1. 12.2 Acre Huntington Beach Least Tern Natural Preserve



Docent Program

Docent Program Duty Statement

PURPOSE: Offer a greater level of protection and awareness for rare birds on the beach and to promote the State Parks mission.

“The mission of the California Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) is to provide for the health, inspiration, and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the State's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its mostvalued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.”

LOCATION: Huntington State Beach Least Tern Natural Preserve

DUTIES: Docents will be responsible for interpreting Western Snowy Plovers and California Least Terns and their habitat to beach users, filling out Daily Log Sheets, and interpreting State Park Rules and Regulations in a way that encourages visitors to voluntarily comply with those rules. Docents will record bird behavior, disturbances, and public activities. They will work independently and are expected to provide their own field equipment (binoculars and chair).

QUALIFICATIONS:

- A positive attitude towards engaging people in conversation.
- Ability to communicate well with others and be sensitive to their needs and views.
- Ability to work independently and resourcefully in a public place. Good written, verbal and observational skills.
- Should be able to identify (most) all birds seen.

REQUIREMENTS:

- Read the Tern/Plover Docent Manual and learn about the Western Snowy Plover and California Least Tern.
- Use the information to understand the importance of the species and its habitat.
- Complete the application and become a State Parks Volunteer
- Sign up for a regular schedule at the Least Tern Natural Preserve.
- Record basic data during each session to help assess **bird behavior**, disturbances and other protective measures.

COMMITMENT:

- A minimum commitment of 2 hours per week during the breeding season is required. It is critical that you be consistent and dependable, and stick with the times to which you've committed.

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PROGRAM BENEFITS AND OPPORTUNITIES:

- Expand your awareness, understanding, and appreciation for our local natural areas and wildlife.
- Participate in educating others about an issue that is important to you.
- Become part of a dedicated volunteer program and spend some great days out on the beach
- Attend ongoing training sessions, visit other plover and tern colonies, and become more involved in local conservation issues.
- If you have other interests and abilities concerning this program, State Parks might need use your help. Signs, fencing, pamphlets, presentations, data analysis, reports, predator control, weeds, and nest-exlosures are some of the topics.

The Docent Role

The terns have done very well since the inception of this program despite human activities. Docents help people learn how to share the beach with plovers and terns. Given the history of beach use and abuse, public education is intended, over time, to minimize the disruptive practices without discouraging acceptable recreation and to implant the idea that the beach is part of a designated Natural Preserve.

Having a positive ambassador talking to people about plovers and terns is the most effective educational tool possible. People like to hear from other people, not from textbooks or other educational media. If you talk to people about terns and plovers, they will learn what you know. Once they have begun to learn, they can begin to care. People who care about the birds will change their behavior toward them.

As a **docent**, you play two important roles:

1. Educator
2. Protector

As an **educator**, you can contact beach visitors by drawing them to you.

1. Providing beach users with accurate information on the natural history and biology of plovers and terns by helping them identify the birds through binoculars and spotting scopes.
2. Interpreting State Park rules for beach users.
3. Encouraging questions and learning on all levels.

As a **protector**, you may contact beach visitors by intercepting those who are not respecting State Park regulations or those who pose a potential threat to the terns and plovers. **Protection includes 4 areas of concerns:**

1. DOGS on beach.
2. Trespassing inside fencing
3. Limited activities along fence
4. Predators

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DOGS

As a docent, one of your roles is to help ensure that all dogs are leashed, on paved surfaces, and not allowed onto the sand. The owner of an unleashed dog should be asked to leash it and asked to stay on paved areas. You can explain the problems created by dogs in an area occupied by protected species, and if that does not resolve the infraction, call Badged Lifeguard Patrol.

TRESPASSING

As a docent, you need to ensure that the boundary fencing of the Natural Preserve is respected and appropriately address the situation if trespassing occurs.

If people trespass into the nesting area, do not try to stop the trespasser with shouts and frantic hand waves, but calmly motion them to come out, intercept them, and advise them politely to avoid the area in the future, with information and explanation. Signs should be in place but may be modified by high tides and sand movement. This is why it is important you are there!

If you feel that a ball or Frisbee game is too near the roost such that the ball may fall inside the fencing, ask the players to move further away. Kite flying over or near the Natural Preserve should be discouraged.

LIMITED ACTIVITIES ALONG THE FENCE

Ideally, we would reserve the dry and wet sand outside the wooden fencing in front of the colony for the sole use of foraging plovers and loafing Least Terns, but the summer season is also very popular with people. At one time we tried to exclude people from the long corridor of sand next to the wooden fencing. We now settle for allowing activities along the wooden fencing.

If an activity is questionable, an assessment of bird behavior should be noted. Dive-bombing birds are a clue that visitors or even bird monitors are too close to nesting activity; a simple movement such as moving a person or their possessions away from the fencing should calm the birds. Use your best judgment.

PREDATORS

During the breeding season, the focus of your attention shifts to protecting tern eggs and chicks by discouraging crows, ravens, kestrels and other predators. If you see predators inside the tern fencing or preying on birds, chicks or eggs, call the Environmental Scientist or Scott Thomas immediately.

ENFORCEMENT

Although it is your job to interpret rules in order to protect Snowy Plovers and Least Terns, it is not your job to enforce them. If an encounter ever occurs where someone refuses to change their behavior, don't let it get the best of you. Though the interaction may be disappointing, try to remain friendly, maintain a level of understanding, and thank them anyway. Depending on the event, you may walk away and call the Environmental Scientist or Badged Lifeguard Patrol. Be sure to record the event on the data sheet.

Any and all interactions that are potentially dangerous should be backed out of immediately. If you ever feel threatened in any way, step away and call the Badged Lifeguard Patrol.

RULES AND REGULATIONS

- **NO DOGS ALLOWED ON BEACH.** Dogs are allowed on paved surfaces, including the paved walkways along the Talbert Channel, and must be on a 6 ft. leash.
- **NO FIRES** except in fire rings.
- **TRASH** belongs in covered containers.
- **NO CAMPING.**
- **HARASSMENT OF ENDANGERED SPECIES IS A FEDERAL CRIME.**

PUBLIC RELATIONS

Good public relations may be defined as the development and maintenance of public understanding, appreciation, and support for the objectives and programs put forth by a specific group or institution. Public Relations do not simply mean the dissemination of information; in fact, the quality of the communication with the public is key. We must remember not only *what* we are trying to communicate, but *with whom* we are communicating- a sincere concern for the welfare of the public should always be at the forefront of our minds.

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTACT

Every contact with the public - whether it is on the beach, through a letter to the editor, or in line at the store represents an opportunity to foster understanding and gain support for our program. Make an effort to be helpful and friendly at all times when dealing with the public. Our goal with the Docent Program is to help people enjoy the beach while learning to share it with other species - not to be the Tern/Plover Police. We need to remember that people are on the beach to relax and have fun, and they need to be treated with respect and courtesy at all times.

One loose statement or action on the part of one Docent can spoil the positive efforts of many; for this reason, we all need to make a constant effort towards friendly, courteous and effective interactions with the public when representing or discussing the Docent Program. The trick to remaining positive about someone doing something wrong is to give them the benefit of the doubt. 90% of the trespassers are not paying attention and feel embarrassed by their action. Help them to not feel bad by saying, "You may not know, but this area is protected because of the rare birds that live here."

There may be times when you experience angry or unreasonable people. If it ever comes to the point where an individual is being abusive, refuses to comply, or is a repeat offender, back off and refer the situation immediately to Badged Lifeguard Patrol or dispatch.

You will be approached by people with many questions. Give them as much information as they need. When you get a question that you cannot answer, and you cannot find the answer in your Docent Manual reference material, then be honest and say you don't know the answer. It is very important not to give out false or misleading information, because it can confuse the visitor and damage the public relations program. Be sure to write down the question and find the answer with another park employee or the Environmental Scientist.

Don't say, "I'm just a docent." You are a trained person with appropriate qualifications that deserves the respect of beach users. Not knowing an answer is acceptable. You can help interest the casual observer to the Nature Preserve's natural and ecological value. By explaining and interpreting the interrelations of plants, animals and humans to their environment in a factual and interesting manner, the Docent may help acquaint the visitor with the great opportunity to both enjoy and preserve the natural environment. Education is the fast step toward understanding, appreciation, and eventual support.

COMMON QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS FROM BEACH USERS

How to field them:

My dog never chases birds.

Even if your dog is not actively chasing plovers and other birds, the dog's presence alone (even when on a leash) causes stress to the birds. Dogs need to be leashed and kept away from the fenced Natural Preserve. The plovers weigh less than one ounce. If their energy is used to fly from disturbances, it can jeopardize their ability to reproduce.

So, where can I run my dog off leash?

Dogs are allowed on the beach at the Huntington Bluffs, and in various city bark parks. Across the Santa Ana River at Newport Beach, leashed dogs are allowed during specified hours only. You must consult current City of Newport Beach dog laws.

Why can't the birds just move down the beach to where there are no/fewer people?

Snowy Plovers and California Least Terns need a specific type of beach for resting and feeding. The beach needs to be wide, relatively flat and open so they can detect potential predators. They use the dunes for roosting, nesting and to escape extreme high tides. We are trying to maintain this Natural Preserve for their specific needs. The birds can't move down the beach, but we humans can!

Just let natural selection proceed — If the bird was meant to die off then it will.

The decline of the Pacific Coast population of Snowy Plovers and the California Least Tern population is due to UNNATURAL events, such as human recreation, dogs, development of coastal property, introduction of exotic plants or animals like the red fox, and an increase in crows and ravens on public beaches. The plovers and terns have lived here much longer than we have and it is only recently that human encroachment has impacted their survival and nesting success.

IN THE EVENT OF AN EMERGENCY

While volunteering as a Docent, you may find yourself in a position to observe conditions that are potential or direct hazards or violations. It is part of your duty to recognize and report such conditions. Please do not attempt to handle any situation which you feel unsure or uncomfortable--call for someone to help you. Judgment is important in deciding whether the situation should simply be noted and reported on the log sheet or if is serious and time-sensitive enough to make an immediate report to the Environmental Scientist, Predator Manager, or park Badged Lifeguard Patrol. Use your cell phone to call the following numbers as needed, contact any park vehicle, or drive to the park headquarters at Magnolia Ave.

Call 911:

- Any medical emergency which is potentially life threatening and requires an ambulance.
- Swimmer needing assistance.
- Violence of any type.

Call Badged Lifeguard Patrol:

- Disturbances approaching violence (threats to Docent's safety)
- Property damage in progress (vandalism of signs, fencing, etc.)
- Off-leash dogs without a visible owner, or owners who refuse to leash their dog.
- Argumentative, vocally uncooperative visitors who harass Docents
- People/dogs entering fenced closure areas who refuse to obey your request to leave.

Reporting Problems:

- Stay calm, be a good witness.
- Don't exaggerate or downplay the situation. Give the facts.
- Provide enough information to give a clear picture of what is happening or what has happened.
- Give your phone number to the dispatcher and stay where you can contact officers when they arrive.
- If someone reported an incident to you, try to get his or her name and phone number for later contact as needed. Also, gather information about the incident or perpetrator from the reporting party. Write them down.

IMPORTANT PHONE NUMBERS

Emergencies 911

Badged Lifeguard Patrol: Dispatcher (951) 943-1582

Ask for Huntington Beach dispatcher, ID self and location, don't hang up

Use for: Dog violations, problem visitors, crimes, violence, vandalism, vehicle on beach

Summer Lifeguard Dispatch:

- Business (714) 536-0606
- Emergency (714) 536-0605 Use for: First Aid, in-water problems, dogs

Predator Management: Scott Thomas (949) 293-2915 Lana Nguyen (949) 201-0884

Use for: Nest and/or chick predation - crows, ravens, kestrels, shrikes, peregrine falcons, red-tailed hawks, burrowing owls, ground squirrels, cats, skunks, any visible predation!

Huntington Beach Headquarters: (714) 536-1454

Use for: General information, park information/operations, sick sea lions or birds

Huntington Beach Maintenance: (714) 374-0609

Use for: Trash problem, dead sea lion, fencing repairs

Resource Management Team: (949) 497-7645

Use for: Fence repairs, weeds, plants, general impacts

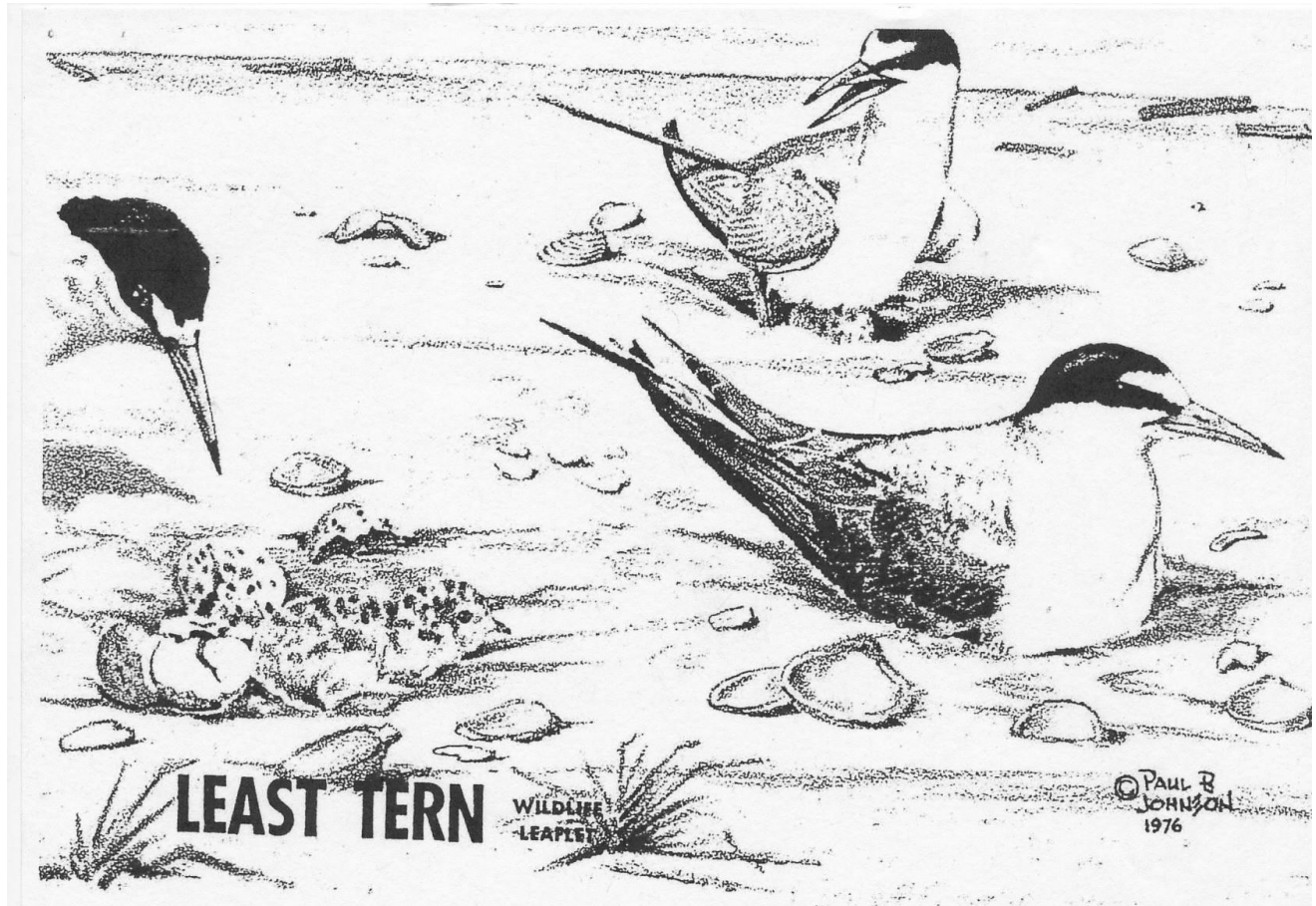
Environmental Scientist: Lana Nguyen (949) 201-0884

Use for: General or urgent concerns

The Least Tern is Endangered in California

by George Seymore

California Department of Fish and Game



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.

