



Least Tern

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Least Tern

(*Sternula antillarum*)

The smallest of all the American tern species, the Least Tern can be found along American coasts and inland waterways. In North Carolina, they are found along much of the coast. The interior and Pacific populations of the Least Tern are classified as endangered, due in part to many threats they face when nesting. Least Terns prefer to nest on sandy beaches where they face the threat of predators such as feral and free ranging cats, dogs, coyotes, raccoons, ghost crabs, human impact, and changing environments such as flooding. Some terns, however, have begun successfully nesting on gravel rooftops.

Description

The Least Tern is between 8 to 9 inches in length and has a wingspan between 18 to 21 inches. They are predominantly white with grey backsides and black coloration leading toward the wing tips. The Least Tern has a breeding and nonbreeding plumage. When breeding, Least Terns have a black cap that ends with a white forehead and a black stripe through the eye ending at the beak. Their beaks are yellow with a black tip. When they are not breeding, they have a black eye stripe that goes toward the back of the head, the top of their head is white, and they have black bills. Least Tern calls are a sharp *killick* or *kip-kip-kip-kideek*.

History and Status

According to reports by fishermen, the Least Tern at one time was one of the most abundant of the waterbirds to frequent the coastline of the South Atlantic. It was highly desired commercially for women's hats due to its beautiful plumage and the feathers' perfect length. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the interior populations of the Least Tern as endangered in 1985. Populations in North Carolina have not been designated as endangered but do remain a species of concern due to their habit of nesting on highly visited beaches and risks of predation. The Least Tern is on the 2016 State of North America's Birds Watch List, meaning that if substantial conservation actions are not taken, it is at risk of extinction.

Habitats & Habits

Least Terns constantly move from location to location along the coast, and will even be found in flocks far out to sea during the non-breeding season. Least Terns usually nest in colonies or occasionally as an isolated pair. Once nesting season begins, Least Terns will begin creating their nests at locations along the coast in sandy or shelly areas, or on gravel rooftops. Least Tern nests are a shallow scrape made in sand, soil or pebbles. Their diet consists of small fish and some invertebrates like crustaceans and insects. Least Terns forage by flying low over the water with quick and deep flapping wings. They will hover over the water for a period of time as they search for prey then will dive down into the water. Sometimes they will catch insects while flying.

As more of their habitat disappears, Least Terns are becoming innovative by nesting on gravel rooftops.



Least tern with chicks on pea gravel rooftop (Photo: Courtesy of Pine Knoll Shores Aquarium)

Range and Distribution

The Least Tern can be found along much of the eastern and southern coasts of the United States and primarily the southern half of the west coast. They are also found throughout islands within the Caribbean and into Central America. The Least Tern also resides along many of the major water systems within the interior of the continent. In North Carolina they are primarily found along the coastline.

Range Map



■ Atlantic Population of the Least Tern Range Map

Least Tern

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Human/NCWRC Interactions

Least Terns typically nest on sandy or shell-mixed beaches, the same beaches many tourists prefer. This has resulted in many terns struggling to find prime nesting areas due to the heavy populations of human tourists. They also nest on the ground, which leaves their nests vulnerable to predators or destruction by beach driving or other human activities.

Least Terns will sometimes nest on rooftops covered with gravel. These rooftops provide protection from ground based threats, but leave the terns vulnerable to avian predators, such as crows and Great Horned Owls. On extremely hot days the temperature on a rooftop can soar. Some building owners place cinder blocks or wooden pallets on their roofs to help the terns by providing the chicks with a shady spot to avoid the heat.

NCWRC, along with nonprofit organizations and other federal and state agencies, is protecting Least Terns in North Carolina by managing protected lands to maintain sandy beach habitat, providing opportunities for people and birds to share our beaches by partnering with towns, counties, and private land owners, as well as working with businesses to create tern friendly rooftops. Signs are posted around colonies to alert humans to the presence of nesting birds. If you see signs on your next visit to your favorite beach, or while out on the water, marking a waterbird nesting area, please observe these amazing birds from a distance, they are working hard to raise their young.

Sources

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Credits

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Have a Heart Share the Shore

Even good dogs and responsible people can frighten birds

Social distancing benefits nesting birds & chicks, as well as humans

GET TO KNOW YOUR SEABIRDS! THE LEAST TERN

- Least Terns nest on beaches, shoals, sand covered dredge material islands, and gravel covered rooftops
- Least Tern nests are small depressions in sand, called scrapes, where they lay 1-3 eggs that are slightly smaller than your thumb
- Least Terns nest in colonies, or occasionally as an individual pair. Incubation lasts 19-25 days

More information: ncwildlife.org/least-tern

Wild Facts

Classification

Order: Charadriiformes

Family: Laridae

Average Size

Length: 8 to 9 in

Weight: 1.3 to 1.6 oz

Wingspan: 18 to 21 in

Food

Small fish, some invertebrates, and insects

Breeding/Young

During courtship the male flies upward with a fish in his bill followed by the female, and then both glide down together. The terns produce one to three chicks per season. A second or third nesting attempt is only made if earlier nests failed. Incubation typically takes 19 to 25 days. The young will leave the nest a few days after hatching to seek shelter. Both parents will feed the young. They will first fly at 19 to 20 days, then will remain with parents for 1 to 2 months.

Life Expectancy

15 years. A Least Tern found in New Jersey in 1981 had been banded in Massachusetts in 1957 making it the oldest Least Tern on record at the age of 24 years and 1 month.



Least Tern hatchling and egg in sand (Annika Andersson)