

Continuing Threats

The least tern faces many obstacles on its nesting territory:

- storm tides - extreme high tides can overwash nests and eggs.
- oil spills and other pollutants - may contaminate water and tern feeding areas
- predation - brown rats, raccoons, skunks, foxes, great black-backed and herring gulls, great horned owls, black-crowned night herons, northern harriers, and American kestrels all eat tern eggs and chicks.
- habitat loss - terns compete for space on the beach with humans and coastal developments; undisturbed sandy beaches are becoming scarce.
- human disturbance - foot and vehicle traffic may crush nests and chicks; kite-flying near colonies flushes adults, which may interpret the kites as predators;
- pets - loose dogs may kill chicks or flush adults off nests, exposing eggs and chicks to predation and the elements, house cats hunt in tern colonies;

Protection

Each nesting season, posts, signs, and snow fencing are erected on the beach around least tern colonies. Along with beach closures, this helps keep human disturbance to a minimum.

Things You Can Do to Help Protect the Least Tern

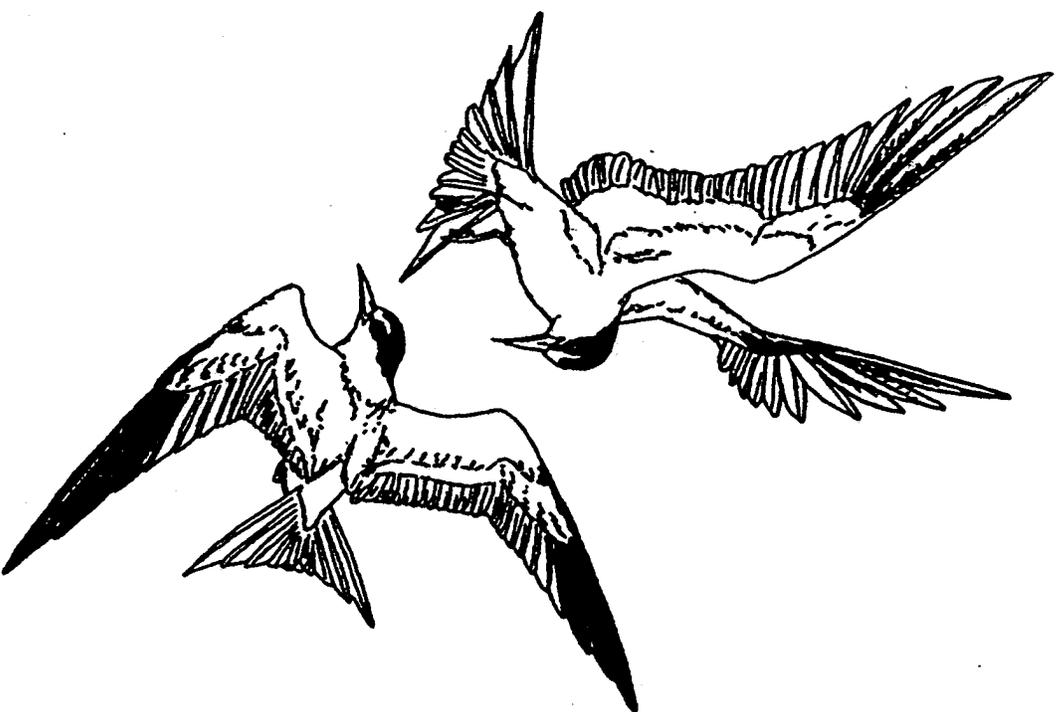
- Respect all areas fenced or posted to protect wildlife.
- Do not approach or linger near least tern colonies.
- Keep pets leashed, if pets are permitted on beaches.
- Don't leave food or scraps on beaches. Garbage attracts predators.

The least tern is protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and by some State laws.

For further information, contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, One Gateway Center, Newton Corner, MA 02158, or your State natural resource agency.



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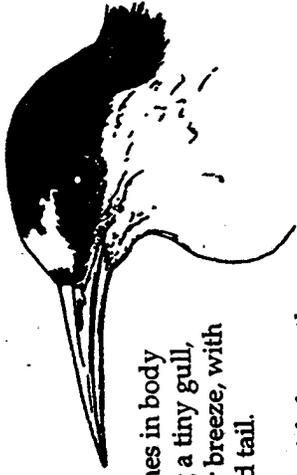


Sharing The Beach With

Least Terns

Description

The least tern, as its name suggests, is the smallest tern in North America, a mere nine inches in body length. Superficially resembling a tiny gull, it flies buoyantly on the summer breeze, with long, pointed wings and a forked tail.



The least tern is easy to distinguish from other terns. Its white forehead, which most other terns lack, contrasts sharply against a jet-black cap. The yellow bill and legs of least terns also set them apart from their larger cousins. The back and wings are a pearly gray, and the breast and underparts snowy white. Their high-pitched call, "chit-chit! chit-chit!" and a series of "chirree-chirree-chirree" notes are familiar summer sounds along many Atlantic Coast beaches.

Distribution and Abundance along the Atlantic Coast

The least tern nests from Maine to Virginia. After spending winter along the coast of Central and South America and the Caribbean, the terns return to our shores in May. A U.S. Fish and Wildlife survey estimated a breeding population of 9,380 pairs of least terns along the Coast from Maine to Virginia in the mid-1980s. Perhaps another 15,000 pairs nested along the South Atlantic and Gulf Coasts.

Threats

During the final decades of the 19th century, many tern species were hunted for their beautiful plumage and tail streamers, which were fashioned into ladies' hats. Tern numbers plummeted. Passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918 put an end to this senseless slaughter, allowing the terns and other bird species to recover.

In their rebound, least terns have faced new threats. Human disturbance, loss of coastal habitat, and an increase in mammalian predators threaten their survival at many locations. While the least tern population along the Atlantic Coast is stable and has never been added to the Federal Endangered Species List, it is a species of concern in several States. Declining interior and West Coast populations were classified as endangered as early as 1970.

Nesting and Chick Rearing

Least terns nest above the high tide line on sandy or stony beaches. They often share the beach with nesting piping plovers. Upon arrival, least terns go through an elaborate courtship display. The male presents his mate with a fish, held tightly in his bill, and swings his head from side to side. Once mated, the pair hollows out a shallow scrape in the sand, in which 2-3 eggs are laid and incubated for about 3 weeks. Both parents share the chores of incubation, brooding, and feeding chicks.



When intruders or predators approach the nesting territory, the chicks crouch motionless, while all adults take to the air. The terns attempt to drive the intruder away by divebombing and often defecating on them. But, being on the ground, nests and chicks are extremely vulnerable. The flightless chicks have no way to escape predators.

After about 3 weeks, the chicks fledge, and flock with their parents at the water's edge. Like the adults, they hover over the riptides and currents but still obtain most food from parents. They dive most commonly for sand launch, a small silvery fish that travels in schools. In September least terns gather in great flocks with other tern species, prior to their lengthy migration south.