

The Least Tern is Endangered in California

Description – The California Least Tern is the smallest American tern, weighing about 1 ounce and measuring 9-inches long and 20-inch wing span. It is identified in spring and summer by a white forehead contrasting with a black crown and nape, bill yellow with black tip; legs yellow; tail forked. Wingbeats are uniquely rapid and the black leading edge of the outer wing is conspicuous in flight. Immature Least Terns have upper parts, which are mottled white and dark brown. Least Terns feed exclusively on small fish. When hunting, the Least Tern dives from as high as 20 feet into the water to capture their prey.

Range and Nesting – San Francisco Bay to San Diego. Coastal waters and beaches. Intricate courtship displays precede nesting, and the presenting of fish to the mate is an important part of the courtship. Their nesting occurs in California from April to September, where it nests in small colonies. The nest is a shallow, round depression in the sand or dried mud, and the birds lay from one to two eggs. The eggs are buffy in color and are splotched heavily with irregular purplish and brownish markings. Incubation period is 20 to 25 days, during which time the female does most of the incubating.

Although California Least Terns can and do nest again after losing eggs or chicks, some adults may abandon further breeding attempts that season. Least Terns are fairly faithful to breeding sites and return year after year regardless of past nesting success. In addition, there is some evidence that Least Terns tend to return to their natal sites to breed. This may have major conservation implications because the average expected breeding life of California Least Terns is estimated at more than 9 years. Least Terns breed after their second year, and first-time breeders are more likely to nest later in the breeding season.

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 3 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.

Endangered Status – The California Least Tern, a subspecies of the Least Tern, is on the U.S. Endangered Species List. It is classified as endangered in California. This subspecies of Least Tern was declared endangered in 1970, but the interior and East coast populations have since also achieved that distinction. The destruction of its habitat by human activities and development has put the species in peril. Where it still finds nesting habitat, it is also vulnerable to predators and to human disturbance when bathers and beach strollers enter its nesting colonies. These recreational activities will cause these birds to abandon nesting activities,



even after eggs have been laid. Least Terns will sometimes abandon their nests if they have been disturbed.

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.

Population History – In 1970 the Secretary of the Interior drew up its first list of endangered species and the Least Tern was on the list. In the same year, the state of California placed the Least Tern on its charter list of endangered species. When California Least Terns were listed as endangered by the federal government and California, their population in California was estimated at 600 breeding pairs. At one time, the beaches of southern California teemed with this species.

By 1994 the population had increased to an estimated 2,792 pairs, which represents more than a fourfold increase. Over 4,500 pairs were recorded in 2001, but that number fell to 3,500 in 2002 with the lowest rate of fledgling production since 1979 (less than 500 young). Although the increase in the breeding population has not been consistent from year to year, long-term trends have been encouraging. Tern population growth has been sustained even though ratios of fledglings to adults have fluctuated between colony sites and years. The population is very vulnerable to quick demise with seasonal fish losses created by El Ninos, disturbance, and predation.

Management and Research Needs – Management of California Least Tern colonies has included intensive monitoring of nesting colonies, site preparation to reduce vegetative cover, protection of sites by means of reduced access to humans, and predator management. Although individual-nesting sites may not be used every year, and reproductive success varies among sites and years, the population of Least Terns in California continues to grow. Historical breeding sites should be preserved and managed for Least Terns because their adaptability to new or different sites depends on past reproductive success, predation pressure, and food supplies.

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.

