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Kale, H. W., II, B. Pranty, B. M. Stith, and C. W. Biggs. 1992. The atlas of the breeding birds of Florida. Final Report. Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Tallahassee, Florida.

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Least Tern *Sterna antillarum*

In Florida Least Terns have traditionally nested on the sandy beaches of barrier islands and along isolated stretches of the mainland shore. More recently this species has proven to be remarkably adaptable in its nesting habits and has taken advantage of new nesting habitat on roofs and on islands and causeways constructed of dredged material. Least Terns breed from central California to the Baja Peninsula, in portions of the Great Plains and Mississippi River Valley, along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts from Maine to Texas, and in coastal areas throughout the Caribbean.

Habitat. Least Terns in Florida nest primarily along the coast, where beaches and roofs provide nest sites and nearby waters supply small forage fish. Small colonies occur inland on flat, gravel-covered rooftops of warehouses, shopping malls, and other large buildings near canals, lakes, or ponds (Fisk 1978). Colonies on roofs are not readily noticed. Nevertheless, throughout most of the state, more colonies are found on roofs or dredged material than on natural beach sites (Gore 1991). Least Terns also occupy recently dredged or deposited sandy substrates in active phosphate mines and in limerock quarries in south Florida.

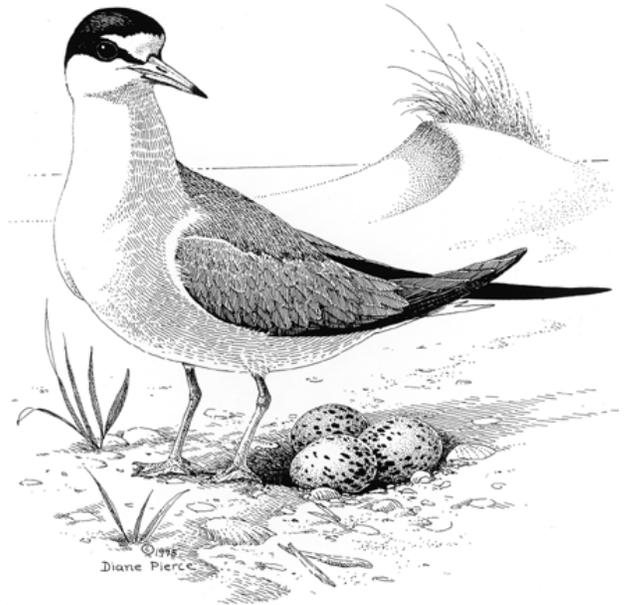


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The diet of the Least Tern consists primarily of fish, but shrimp and marine worms are occasionally taken (How 1932).

Least Tern nesting colonies may consist of only a few nests, or they may comprise several hundred or more. The number of nests and their density is governed by many factors, including past reproductive success of the colony, availability of food, and disturbance. Least Terns usually return to the same nesting site each year, unless the colony has consistently failed to fledge young.

The adult Least Terns construct each nest by simply working a shallow depression, or scrape, into the loose sand or gravel. Two eggs are usually produced, but clutches of 1 or 3 are not unusual. The eggs, which are cream-colored with blotches or spots of dark brown, are laid in April or May and hatch after about 21 days. The young leave the nest in 3 or 4 days, but cannot fly strongly until about 4 weeks of age.

Seasonal Occurrence. Egg dates have been confirmed from 25 April through 6 August. Although most young are fledged by the end of July, renesting and late-nesting pairs often extend the season into August or even September.

Status. Least Terns are considered a Threatened Species in Florida (Wood 1991) based on previous population declines and threats to their coastal habitat. Except for areas with extensive salt marsh or mangrove habitat, Least Terns nest along nearly all of Florida's coast. Because of their use of gravel-covered roofs, Least Terns are found even along intensively developed portions of the coast, and populations are believed to be stable or increasing.

Jeffery A. Gore

Least Tern

