

California Least Tern (*Sterna antillarum browni*)

Status - Federal: Endangered State: Endangered



The California least tern is a small seabird, measuring 10 inches in length and a 30 inch wingspan when fully grown. It has long, tapered wings and a forked tail. The black-capped head and black-tipped, pale gray wings contrast with its white body. The California least tern has a white forehead, a black-tipped yellow bill, and yellowish feet. It is the only subspecies of least tern found in California. Least terns feed in shallow estuaries or lagoons where small fish are abundant. They feed on smelt, anchovies, silversides, and other small, near-shore prey. When looking for prey, they hover above the water and plunge to

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its surface when fish are spotted.

Range: The California least tern once nested widely along the central and southern California coast and the Pacific coast of Mexico. Nesting today is limited to colonies in San Francisco Bay, Sacramento River delta, and areas along the coast from San Luis Obispo County to San Diego County. The greatest concentrations of breeding pairs nest in Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties.

Reproduction: California least terns breed in loose colonies. Each colony usually contains 30-50 nesting pairs. Breeding birds are present at the colony from April through September.

Nesting starts in mid-May. After mating, females lay their eggs in shallow depressions on barren to sparsely vegetated sites near water, usually on sandy or gravelly substrate. Clutches of 2 - 3 eggs are typical, with both adults sharing incubation duties. Young are hatched after 3 - 4 weeks, and are fed by both adults. They learn to fly at about 3 weeks of age, leaving the colony at 4 - 5 weeks. Young continue to be fed by both parents until two weeks after they leave the colony.

Endangerment: Historical nesting locations have been disturbed or eliminated by urban development. Because they need to nest close to shoreline areas where prey is abundant, the birds are often forced to concentrate their colonies in areas that are too small, making them more vulnerable to predation and disturbance. American kestrels, burrowing owls, feral cats, nonnative red foxes, American crows and other predators all take their toll. The terns are particularly vulnerable to predation when nesting grounds are located near developed areas, where domestic cats and human-tolerant native species such as racoons prey on them.