



Common Name: LEAST TERN

Scientific Name: *Sternula antillarum* Lesson

Other Commonly Used Names: Little tern, silver turnlet, sea swallow, minute tern, little striker, and killing peter

Previously Used Names: *Sterna antillarum*

Family: Laridae

Rarity Ranks: G4/S3

State Legal Status: Rare

Federal Legal Status: Interior population listed as endangered. Other populations are not federally listed.

Federal Wetland Status: N/A

Description: Georgia's smallest tern at about 23 cm (9 in) in length with a 50 cm (20 in) wingspread, the least tern is white with pale gray feathers on the back and upper surfaces of the wings, except for a narrow black stripe along the leading edge of the upper wing feathers. The least tern has a black cap with a small patch of white on the forehead. In summer, the adult has a yellow bill with a black tip and yellow to orange feet and legs. Its

tail is deeply forked. In winter, the bill, legs and feet are black. The juvenile has a black bill and yellow legs, and the feathers of the back have dark margins, giving the bird a distinctly "scaled" appearance. The least tern's small size, white forehead, and yellow bill serve to distinguish it from other terns.

Similar Species: The adult sandwich tern (*Thalasseus sandvicensis*) is the most similar species to the adult least tern, but is much larger at about 38 cm (15 in) in length and has a black bill with a pale (usually yellow) tip and black legs. Juvenile least terns and sandwich terns look very similar in appearance. They both have black bills, although the sandwich tern's usually has a light tip. The legs of the least tern are yellow while the legs of the sandwich tern are black. Gull-billed terns (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) are similar in appearance, but are also significantly larger at (35-36 cm; 14 in) than least terns with black bill and legs and a much more robust build.

Habitat: Historically coastal populations of this species nested primarily on bare or sparsely vegetated barrier island beaches, but also used sand flats and spits, and shell islands. Coastal colonies are normally located just above the high tide line in ephemeral habitats that are subject to wash-over by storm tides. Nesting colonies on Cumberland Island periodically occur on the open sand swales between the large dunes of that island. Interior populations traditionally used river sand bars and similar sites for nesting. Today many nesting colonies make use of agricultural fields, parking lots, sand and gravel pits, dredge spoil sites, bare land associated with airports, and flat gravel rooftops. Use of these sites may be an adaptation to human disturbance on beaches where traditional nesting sites were located. Much of the breeding population in Georgia uses dredge-spoil islands and gravel rooftops of large buildings. Foraging habitat of coastal populations includes bays, estuaries, inlets, river mouths, fresh water ponds, and shallow near-shore ocean waters.

Diet: Primarily small fishes, some crustaceans and insects.

Life History: Least terns return to breeding grounds in North America in April. Courtship and pair formation begin soon after arrival at the nesting colony. Courtship feeding, in which the male brings a fish and offers it to the female prior to mating, is a characteristic breeding behavior of this species. Nests on natural substrates are small depressions or scrapes in bare sand that are often lined with shell fragments. On gravel rooftops little or no scrape is formed, depending upon availability of suitable material. Clutch size is normally 2-3 eggs, but ranges from 1-5 eggs. The eggs are small, about 31 mm (1.2 in) in length, and are olive-buff to buff with dark brown markings. Both sexes share incubation duties, which usually last 20-25 days before the eggs hatch. The male brings food to the female while she sits on the eggs. Incubating birds have been observed shaking water from their feathers onto the eggs, apparently to cool them. Adults aggressively defend the colony and characteristically dive at human intruders. Least terns will renest if the eggs are lost but do not raise more than one brood per season. Chicks are precocial and leave the nest 1-2 days after hatching and although they are able to fly about 20 days after hatching, they remain dependent upon the adults for several weeks after fledgling. In September, least terns leave Georgia and migrate south. Colonies vary greatly in size from a few pairs to over 1,500 pairs. This species forages in shallow waters by plunging into the water and grabbing small

fish or invertebrates within several centimeters of the surface. Rapid, graceful flight and a habit of hovering a few meters above the water before diving to the surface are characteristic.

Survey Recommendations: A minimum of one annual survey of each known natural and artificial nesting site including beaches, dredge spoil sites, and gravel rooftops is recommended. New sites where nesting is likely to occur should be checked to see if they are occupied. Where possible, nesting success and productivity should be determined.

Range: The least tern breeds along the Atlantic Coast of the U.S. from Massachusetts to Florida, along the Gulf Coast to Texas, along the coast of the Yucatan peninsula, Belize, and Honduras, on the Pacific Coast of California and Mexico, in the Bahamas and West Indies, and on the coast of Venezuela. Interior U.S. populations breed locally in appropriate habitat primarily along the Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, and Platte river drainages. Least terns winter along the southern portions of the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of Mexico and the Atlantic Coast of Central and South America as far south as northeastern Brazil. In Georgia, least terns have nested on barrier island beaches, dredge spoil sites, and on rooftops of several large building in Savannah, Brunswick, Kingsland, St. Marys, Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base, and well inland at Ft. Stewart. During the Breeding Bird Atlas project they also nested in small numbers on a rooftop in Vidalia.

Threats: U.S. breeding populations of least terns were severely depleted by hunting for the millinery trade in the late 1800s. The breeding population in Georgia had apparently recovered by 1925 when some 2,500 pairs nested on Oysterbed Island near the mouth of the Savannah River. By 1959, the population had again declined, and fewer than 200 pairs could be located in Chatham County. A 1973 survey of parts of Georgia's coast located fewer than 500 least terns; however, a 1980 survey estimated 1,300 pairs throughout Georgia's coast in colonies ranging from 3 to 300 pairs. A survey by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources in 1995 located an estimated 905 pairs of least terns in 12 colonies. Three colonies totaling 455 pairs were located on rooftops, five colonies totaling 387 pairs were located on dredge spoil disposal sites, and four colonies totaling 63 pairs were on natural beaches. Studies by a University of Georgia graduate student in 1996 and 1997 located an estimated 1,563 and 1,270 nesting pairs, respectively. Over 70 percent of these nests were on rooftops. The replacement of gravel with plastic sheeting threatens these rooftop colonies. Human disturbance at nest sites remains the greatest threat to least terns in Georgia.

Georgia Conservation Status: From 2007-2009 nesting occurred on Cumberland Island, St. Catherines Island Bar, Pelican Spit (Glynn County), Brunswick Channel dredge spoil island, Andrew's Island dredge deposit site, and rooftops in Savannah and Kingsland.

Conservation and Management Recommendations: Efforts to maintain and increase Georgia's least tern population have been aimed at conserving, and in one case, creating specific nesting sites. In coastal habitats this has consisted primarily of reducing disturbance from pedestrian beach users and vehicles by restricting access to some nesting areas. Conservation measures proposed for rooftop nesting birds include covering drain

holes and providing sunshades for chicks to decrease mortality, but the increasing use of plastic sheeting or rubberized roofing rather than gravel for commercial rooftops may reduce the importance of these sites in the future and will likely reduce nesting populations. Other management techniques may include predator control, and use of shields to provide cover on roofs or to prevent young from jumping off.

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M. Harris, 1999: original account

R. C. George, 2010: Breeding Bird Atlas species account

T. Schneider and B. Winn, July 2010: modified and edited text

K. Owers, July 2010: updated status and ranks, added pictures

