



The California Least Tern

A Battle for Survival

Least terns are the smallest members of the gull family. Graceful in flight, these shorebirds beat their wings very rapidly, enabling them to hover in the air. They live almost entirely on small fish. When in search of food, least terns usually swoop along the water's surface, but sometimes they dive headfirst into the water from a great height.

Once a common sight along the Southern California coast, the endangered California least tern now struggles to survive on only a few isolated beaches and estuaries. Ever-increasing demand for coastal land and recreational access has severely reduced the number of beaches and mud flats available for nesting. Pollution and the filling of shallow bays and estuaries have also destroyed many of the tern's feeding areas. To make matters worse, dogs and cats raid nests already threatened by natural predators to feed on the eggs and young terns.

In 2004 the California least tern population was at about 6,500 breeding pairs, an increase over previous years. Nesting and feeding preserves, like this one, protect the few remaining breeding sites. As Southern California's coastal growth continues, these small preserves will become even more important for the tern's survival.



Nesting least terns have the right-of-way here. Please stay out of posted areas and view the terns only from a distance. Their survival depends on it.

Courtesy of California Department of Fish and Game

