

Least Tern, *Sternula antillarum*

Status:

State: Endangered

Federal: Not listed

Identification

The least tern is the smallest of the North American terns (about 9 in. in length), a black-capped tern with white underparts and gray upper body, wings and forked tail. Unlike the common and Forster's terns that also inhabit New Jersey's coastal areas, the least tern has a white forehead with a black eye-line connecting to the black cap. The least tern is also distinguished by its sulfur yellow bill, which is tipped black. In fall, the black cap retreats, with black covering only the back of the head and a line through each eye.



© Chris Davidson

The bill and legs also lose their yellow color, turning dusky to black. Sexes are similar in coloration but females are slightly smaller than males.

Juvenile birds are similar to non-breeding adults, but the upper body may be more brownish gray and there is even less black on the cap.

Least terns produce several calls, more musical and high pitched than other terns, and described variously as kip, kip, kip or kit-kit-kit, and kid-ick, kid-ick, and also a rasping zr-e-e-e-p. Calls are often given in such rapid succession that two or three birds can sound like a large flock.

Habitat

New Jersey least tern nests colonies of a few to several hundred pairs are found primarily along barrier island beaches or mainland beach strands. Bare sandy areas or areas sparsely vegetated with such typical beach vegetation as sea rocket (*Cakile edentula*), American beach grass (*Ammophila breviligulata*), beach clotbur (*Xanthium echinatum*), and seaside spurge (*Euphorbia polygonifolia*) that are just beyond the reach of normal spring tides are preferred. Nesting colonies are also found on sandy dredge disposal sites, especially after recent deposition before the establishment of dense vegetation. Least terns may also nest near sand and gravel pits where sand piles from mining operations provide suitable nesting habitat. Nesting on gravel rooftops has occurred in Florida, Mississippi and other locations (Fisk 1975, Jackson and Jackson 1985) but has not been documented in New Jersey. The birds typically forage in bays, lagoons, estuaries, rivers and lakes along the coast.

Status and Conservation

Through most of the 19th Century, the least tern was a common breeder along the New Jersey coast. However, as was true for so many of our coastal birds, by the early 20th century, egg collecting and hunting for the millenary trade had decimated least tern populations. Protection afforded by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 and changing fashion trends enabled Least Tern numbers to rebound, but, since the late 1940s, coastal development and the elevated recreational use of beaches began another population decline. Populations stabilized in recent decades as management measures were implemented, but recently, populations have begun declining again, due primarily to predation losses and increases in losses to coastal flooding.