

California Least Tern

By Bob Garrison

No animal offers wildlife viewers more striking beauty and delicate grace than the California least tern. With rapid wing-beats and effortless flight, this smallest member of the gull and tern family tirelessly hunts for fish along portions of the central and southern California coast where it breeds. Searching for anchovies, topsmelt and silversides, the terns hover high above the water before plunging head-first after their prey. Watching these forked tailed jewels also provides an important reminder of the value and threats to California's other 291 species of plants and animals officially listed as rare, threatened or endangered.

Despite incredible odds, the endangered California least tern is holding its own on some of the state's most expensive and sought-after real estate. In the spring, the terns return from their wintering grounds on the Central or South American coast to nest along California beaches. Competing with sun bathers and beach-side communities for a patch of sandy ground to nest, about 2,500 breeding pairs of least terns have been squeezed onto only 36 breeding sites between the San Francisco Bay and Mexican border. With many beaches overrun with swimmers, sunbathers, beachcombers and their pets, more than half of the terns now breed on landfills or other man-made surfaces with restricted public access, such as military reserves, airports, harbors, and ecological reserves.

The tern's needs are quite basic; an open stretch of bare ground to lay their two eggs, a nearby estuary to fish, and solitude. Least tern eggs and chicks are extremely vulnerable to attacks from other birds, cats, dogs and non-native eastern red foxes. Because the terns are now forced to breed on small areas of open beach, a few predators can destroy an entire colony of young. In addition, human disturbance will force the terns to abandon their nests so viewing these birds requires care and constraint.

Only view least terns as they hunt for fish along beaches or estuaries. Stay away from breeding colonies and report any over eager bird watchers to land managers. A few sites with bluff overlooks may offer long-distance views of breeding colonies so bring along your binoculars and spotting scopes. Enjoy watching this rare, beautiful bird and do your part as a wildlife viewer, conservationist and Californian to protect our state's threatened and endangered species.

Where to watch California least terns:

Follow wildlife viewing road signs or check the newly revised [California Wildlife Viewing Guide](#) for directions to the following areas:

- Lake Merritt -- Oakland
- Robert Crown Memorial State Beach -- Alameda
- McGrath State Beach -- Ventura
- Bolsa Chica Ecological Reserve -- Huntington Beach
- Upper Newport Bay Ecological Reserve -- Newport Beach
- Mission Bay Park -- San Diego
- Tijuana Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve -- Imperial Beach

Other sites include:

- Venice Beach – Venice

You can purchase a [California Wildlife Viewing Guide](#) which provides detailed wildlife viewing information and directions to these and over 190 other wildlife viewing sites by visiting www.CAWatchableWildlife.org.

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