



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
Sacramento Fish & Wildlife Office  
Species Account  
CALIFORNIA LEAST TERN  
*Sternula antillarum browni*



CLASSIFICATION: Endangered (Recommended for downlisting to threatened)

Federal Register 35:16047; October 13, 1970

[http://ecos.fws.gov/docs/federal\\_register/fr27.pdf](http://ecos.fws.gov/docs/federal_register/fr27.pdf)

The species' population has increased from 600 in 1973 to roughly 7100 pairs in 2005. The number of California least tern sites has nearly doubled since the time of listing.

See review at [http://ecos.fws.gov/docs/five\\_year\\_review/doc775.pdf](http://ecos.fws.gov/docs/five_year_review/doc775.pdf)



CRITICAL HABITAT: Not designated

RECOVERY Final

Revised California Least Tern Recovery Plan, September 27, 1985

[http://ecos.fws.gov/docs/recovery\\_plan/850927.pdf](http://ecos.fws.gov/docs/recovery_plan/850927.pdf)

This plan is now outdated. See our [5-year review](#) (PDF) for explanation.

## DESCRIPTION

The CA Least Tern has a distinctive black cap. It has black stripes running from the cap across the eyes to the beak. These contrast with a white forehead. Other upper parts are gray. Underparts are white. CA Least Terns have short, forked tails. Their bills and legs are orange. When a CA Least Tern is flying, you can see a black wedge on the end of its wings.

As its name implies, the least tern is the smallest of North American terns. It is 21-23 cm (around 8¼ to 9 inches) long. Its wingspan is 48-53 cm (around 19 to 21 inches). They mainly eat small fishes, but also shrimp and sometimes other invertebrates.

Most least terns begin breeding in their third year. Mating begins in April or May. Males perform elaborate aerial displays. After that, they offer fishes to the female. Nesting starts shortly afterwards in colonies on relatively open beaches kept free of vegetation by natural scouring from tidal action. The typical colony is 25 pair. The nest is a simple scrape in the sand or shell fragments. The typical clutch is 2 eggs. Both parents incubate and care for the young.

Predators include larger birds, mammals such as raccoons and foxes, domestic dogs and cats. See our [5-year review](#) (PDF) for a detailed list of predators.

## DISTRIBUTION

The Pacific Coast of California, from San Francisco to Baja California. See [5-year review](#) (PDF) for detailed, up-to-date distribution information.

## THREATS

Most of the terns rely on degraded habitat on the beaches of densely populated Southern California. Nesting habitat is often separated from the ocean by recreational beach use. Disturbances include a) people and domestic animals walking too close to nests, b) noise pollution from construction or other human activities, c) aircraft flying low or landing in nesting areas, d) military training exercises. See [5-year review](#) (PDF) for information about other threats.

## REFERENCES FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

NOTE: There is a special CA least tern species account for 4th, 5th and 6th grade students. See [www.fws.gov/sacramento/es/animal\\_spp\\_acct/ca\\_least\\_tern\\_kf.htm](http://www.fws.gov/sacramento/es/animal_spp_acct/ca_least_tern_kf.htm)

Credits: CA least tern photo, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

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