

Threatened Shorebirds Get Help From Volunteers At Gateway NRA

In direct competition for use of open beach areas, some concerned people are throwing a punch on behalf of struggling shorebirds.

At Gateway National Recreation Area, two species of colonial nesting shorebirds, both of which are on the New York State threatened and endangered species list, can be found nesting and breeding within the park boundaries. The Common and Least tern (*Sterna hirundo* and *S. albifrons*, respectively) are determinedly building their nests there, within the shadow of the urban skyline.

During the 1983 spring, the park put out a call to the local community to lend a hand in increasing and protecting necessary habitat for these species by isolating areas within the park for their exclusive use. Some 25 volunteers from the New York City chapters of Audubon and Sierra Club aided in fencing off portions of the ocean beachfront to pedestrian and ORV access, thus expanding by approximately one-third the area previously available for these species.

The problem at Gateway is only one slice of the larger situation that prevails around the ocean-lapped edges of the country. With 54 percent of the population living within 50 miles of our coastline, the colonial nesting shorebirds must compete for habitat with recreationists and developers.

Adult terns return from their Latin American wintering areas in late April and early May. As with most Larids, common terns locate their colonies on islands and isolated beaches. Their colonial nesting hab-

its make good site selection important. A predator, or humans, stumbling into a colony can easily eliminate large numbers of eggs and chicks.

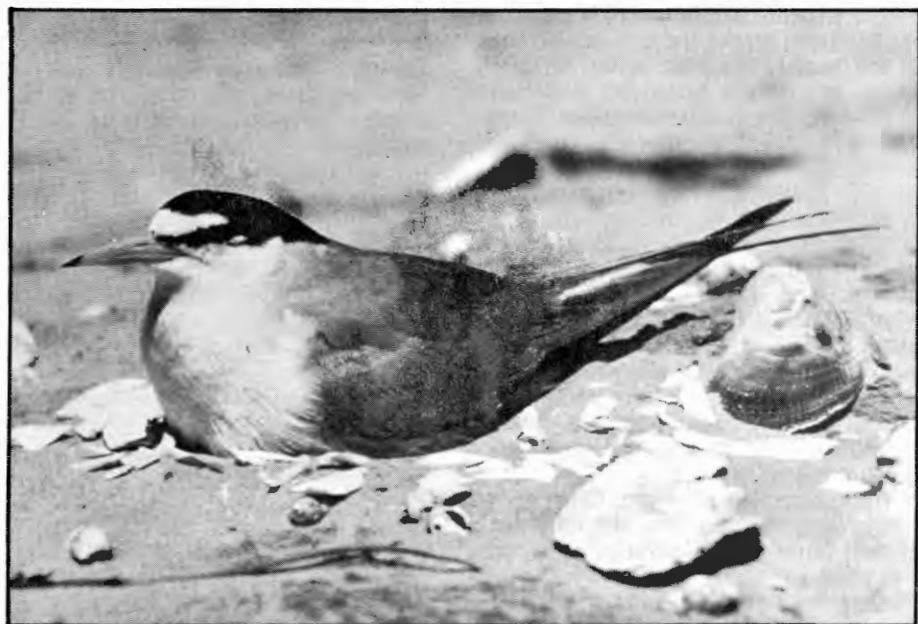
In addition to isolation, good tern habitat normally is characterized by some form of low vegetation. Older chicks, when not guarded by the parents, crouch under nearby plants for protection from predators and the sun's heat. Another essential for a tern colony is adequate food supply within several miles.

Tern nests vary in quality from well-constructed groups of twigs and grasses to slight depressions in the sand lined with shell fragments. The eggs are really well camouflaged, their color light brown or grey-green with darker spots.

About three weeks after the clutch is completed, the eggs hatch into small balls of down. The young chicks are able to walk almost from birth and require up to 10 minutes a day. This parent-pooing diet boosts the chicks to adult size in only 24 days, at which point they have shed their down and grown adult-like feathers.

Adult terns continue to help their young learn to fish and will feed their young during migration and throughout their first winter in the warm, temperate, and tropical regions.

The greatest danger to tern survival has been from human beings. Tern eggs once were collected for human consumption. These birds now are protected against such human predation by Federal legislation; however man still causes many problems to these struggling species. Dune buggies, scavenging gulls from nearby landfills, and repeated disturbance by



Least tern is shown here, on her nest in the sands of Breezy Point, part of Gateway Nat. Rec. Area.

nature lovers with good intentions — all are disrupting factors within the tern colonies and can lead to exposure death of the chicks or outright desertion by the adults.

Toxic chemicals in the environment have been linked directly to developmental problems and feather loss. An indirect pressure is the reduction in fish populations that limit shorebirds' food sources.

The Gateway effort to improve the terns' survival chances is a heartening example of the accommodation that can occur when information about a situation is made known to the public, when management acts to bring the public into the conservation effort, and when human beings elect to throw some of their topheavy advantage into the light side of the scale.

The operative principle here is that good terns deserve a good turn.

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