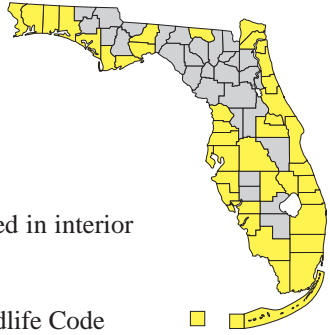


## LEAST TERN *Sterna antillarum*

- Order:** Charadriiformes  
**Family:** Laridae  
**FNAI Ranks:** G4/S3  
**U.S. Status:** None in Florida; Endangered in interior of U.S. and Mexico  
**FL Status:** Threatened

U.S. Migratory Bird Treaty Act and state Wildlife Code prohibit take of birds, nests, or eggs. Many seabird colonies are fenced and posted during breeding season; some of most important are state-designated as Critical Wildlife Areas.



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**Description:** Smallest North American tern. Breeding adults light gray above, black cap and nape, white forehead, and black line running from crown through eye to base of bill. Bill yellowish-orange, often with a dark tip (black in non-breeding adults). Underparts white or grayish; tail short and deeply forked; legs and feet yellowish-orange. Outer primaries have dark edges conspicuous in flight. Immature has dark bill and black eye-line and is mottled above with more dark on upper wing.

**Similar Species:** Small size and combination of white forehead, pale gray upperparts, and yellowish legs in breeding plumage differentiate the least tern from other terns.

**Habitat:** Coastal areas throughout Florida, including beaches, lagoons, bays, and estuaries. Increasingly use artificial nesting sites, including

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gravel rooftops, dredge spoil islands or other dredged material deposits, construction sites, causeways, and mining lands. Nesting areas have a substrate of well-drained sand or gravel and usually have little vegetation.

**Seasonal Occurrence:** Migratory. Generally begins nesting in mid-April in central and southern Florida and in May in northern Florida. Terns are gone from state November - February.

**Florida Distribution:** Found throughout almost all coastal Florida, including the Keys. Adoption of artificial nesting sites, particularly rooftops, has led to increased use of inland locations, mainly in Orange, Seminole, Polk, and Leon counties. Does not nest in Big Bend region of Gulf coast, which mostly consists of salt marsh. Also absent from mangrove-dominated shorelines of Monroe County.

**Range-wide Distribution:** Western Hemisphere. Breeds along U.S. coast from Maine to Texas and south through Bahamas and West Indies to coastal Venezuela; from central California to northern Mexico; and along major interior river systems in Midwest and Great Plains. Winters along Pacific coast from southern Mexico to Peru and eastern coasts of Mexico, Central America, and South America to Brazil and northern Argentina.

**Conservation Status:** Strong indication that populations in Florida have increased since the 1970s, although unclear by how much because of varying levels of census effort. Difficult to estimate because habitat is ephemeral and nesting sites may change from year to year. More recent work in panhandle found greater numbers of terns than in previous reports. A conservative estimate in 1996 was 10,000 birds. Many nesting sites in public ownership; some designated as Critical Wildlife Areas. Successful nesting on gravel rooftops is increasing. Nesting sites subject to human use and development, destructive storm events, and predation by birds and mammals. Rooftop nesters risk exposure to high temperatures, flooding, and high winds. Trend toward rolled plastic roofs in place of gravel could have a serious impact on availability of suitable nesting areas.

**Protection and Management:** Continue population monitoring to refine population estimates and trends and to track colony locations. Continue to educate building managers, emphasizing importance of gravel roofs and of not disturbing nesting birds. Keep dredge spoil islands and causeway rights-of-way free of thick vegetation to extend use of these sites by terns. Listed status prohibits disturbing or destroying birds, eggs, or nests.

**Selected References:** Gore and Kinnison 1991, Hovis and Robson 1989, Poole and Gill (eds.) 1997, Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Rodgers et al. (eds.) 1996, Stevenson and Anderson 1994, Zambrano et al. 1997.