



Florida Department of Environmental Protection
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Least Tern Management Update 2008 Frequently Asked Questions

The Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, in cooperation with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FFWCC), is again seasonally closing a small, 3.5 acre area on the south end of Keewaydin Island to provide least terns (*Sterna antillarum*) with a place to nest and raise young. These birds are listed as a **Threatened Species** in Florida by FFWCC based on previous population declines and threats to their coastal breeding habitat. The Federal Migratory Bird Treaty also legally protects least terns. This is the seventh year the Reserve has posted this area.

Q: Is the south tip of Key Island being closed to the public?

A: No. Only a small, 3.5-acre, partially-vegetated area above the high tide line is closed. Access around the southern tip will remain open. This area does not impact public beach access and closing this area will also protect regenerating dune vegetation.

Q: When will the area be closed?

A: Signs and string are typically installed from the time least terns begin arriving in Collier County (mid-April) until the end of the nesting season (mid-August) when adult terns and fledged chicks return to their South American wintering grounds.

Q: Has this area been closed before?

A: Yes, six times over the past several years.

Q: Why is it important to close this area?

A: Due to rapid coastal growth and increased visitation around the Naples area, valuable nesting habitat (undisturbed sandy beaches on barrier islands) providing the best opportunity for least terns to be successful is becoming less available during the nesting season.

In 1996, an emergent sand bar southwest of Cape Romano began rebuilding and at its largest (4.5 acres) provided a good nesting site for 800-1,000 least terns. Reserve staff closed this sand bar from 2001 to 2003 and the number of nesting least terns using this site increased. By 2005 however, coastal processes typical of the area eroded this sand bar to under 0.2 acres and it can longer serve as a viable nesting site.

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Least Tern Q & A

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Q: What nesting habitat is required?

A: Least terns need wide sand and shell beaches, with elevations well above the mean high water line to prevent the eggs or young from being washed away during storm events. Birds choose beaches with sparse, low vegetation. Small plants can provide shelter for chicks but are not large enough to harbor most predators.

Q: How do least terns make their nests?

A: Least terns nest on the ground, making a “scrape” or shallow depression in the sand with no additional nesting material. Nesting together in a colony, each pair lays two or three well-camouflaged eggs.

Q: How do people affect least tern nesting success?

A: Parent birds lay on the scrape sheltering their eggs and young. People and dogs are perceived as predators. Parent birds will fly off the nest and attempt to ward off any predators approaching the area, leaving eggs and young vulnerable to the sun and heat. If parent birds are frequently disturbed, the colony is likely to fail.

Q: How long does it take the eggs to hatch?

A: Both parents share the job of incubating the eggs for approximately three weeks, protecting them from predators and intense heat.

Q: Do the chicks stay in the scrape?

A: The chicks only remain in the nest scrape for a few hours after hatching. As the chicks begin to grow and become active, they leave the nest scrape and also may venture outside the posted area. They typically remain near the scrape area for 3-4 weeks, where the parent birds provide food and shelter from sun, rain and predators. By mid-August, the chicks are ready to fly and the least tern families begin their trip south.