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Eye to eye with an Elegant Tern
DS/24

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Together we defend our region's birds, unique biodiversity, and threatened habitats through advocacy, education, and restoration.

Sketches
SAN DIEGO BIRD ALLIANCE

Celebrating More than 75 Years of Protecting Birds

SPRING 2025 • VOLUME 76 • NUMBER 2

Supreme fishers and aerial marvels, the terns of Southern California face difficult challenges as they flock each year to our sand spits and tidelands. SDBA is working to protect them all.

Composite image of Royal Terns (with one stray Forster's). Photos by Jenna Apserslag

CALIFORNIA LEAST TERNS

A Homecoming of Hope on Mariner's Point

by Cristina Santa Maria, Conservation Manager

Last spring, nearly 30 eager new Ternwatcher volunteers gathered with me at Mariner's Point in Mission Bay, absorbing the details of their new role. This was their first introduction to the site's California Least Tern nesting grounds—a place where these new recruits would soon dedicate countless hours monitoring for human and predator disturbances to help protect one of California's most endangered seabirds.

Vandalized Least Tern eggs on Mariner's Point. Photo by Cristina Santa Maria.

Every spring, I hold my breath in anticipation of the colony's return, but the wait this time was particularly nerve-racking. The previous season had been a disruptive one—the entire colony had abandoned Mariner's Point due to unrelenting disturbances. As I walked the group through the landscape, pointing out the subtle signs of predators perched nearby, I recounted the threats that had driven the colony away. I had spent the months since fearing they might never return.

Then, suddenly, a burst of sharp, high-pitched squeaks rang out, crisp and urgent, the unmistakable sound of California Least Terns in motion. Their stiff, rapid wingbeats cut through the air in a flurry, their white forms flickering against the blue sky as they darted overhead. They had arrived, their voices weaving a familiar melody. I froze, stunned by the sight. I could hardly believe it at first, and then, pure joy flooded over me. "They're back!" I gasped, my voice thick with emotion as tears welled in my eyes.

The volunteers turned to look at me, wide-eyed, before following my gaze skyward. I could see it on their faces—the excitement, the wonder, the understanding of why this work mattered so deeply. Some smiled, others whispered in awe, but all of them had just witnessed the return of a species that had nearly given up on this place. At that moment, the training session transformed into something more profound. This wasn't just about learning protocols or taking notes—it was about understanding the deep connection we share with these birds and the resilience it takes to protect them. The terns had given us hope, and in return, we were committed to protecting and watching over them.

Months before this magical moment, before the first eggs are laid, before the chicks take their first, wobbly steps, countless hands worked together, including my own, to transform this vulnerable stretch of land into a sanctuary for these birds. We removed invasive vegetation that could entangle chicks or obstruct their view of nearby predators, and we strategically placed clay tile shelters to provide cover against predators, ensuring the nesting area is suitable for giving these birds a fighting chance. Watching the effort come to life gives me a deep sense of purpose, knowing it all leads to something greater—life returning to this precious place.

The terns wasted no time, quickly scraping shallow nests into the sand, as their mates swooped in with small fish as courtship offerings. Their unique courtship behavior is a fascinating sight—shaking their heads side to side in an almost ritualistic dance, elegantly presenting the fish, signaling the start of a new cycle. Weeks later, the first eggs appeared—tiny, speckled spheres nestled in the sand. Each one representing the culmination of our efforts and the future of the species.

The real work had just begun. With the arrival of eggs came a new set of challenges—predators such as gulls patrolling the area, owls visiting overnight, and swift Peregrine Falcons hunting overhead. Climate fluctuations had pushed fish populations farther offshore, making it harder and more time-consuming for the terns to find food, leaving their eggs exposed and vulnerable.

On the last day of May, as I was monitoring the colony, a tern suddenly dive-bombed my head, shrieking its protest and narrowly missing me with the unmistakable splatter of tern droppings—a clear message that the first chicks had hatched, and I was too close to their tiny, downy bodies nestled in the sand. The colony pulsed with life, parents flying back and forth to the ocean, returning with anchovies and sardines to feed their young.

Least Tern chicks avail themselves of clay tile shelters. Photo by Brooke Gullatta of USDA Wildlife Services.

Conservation is incredibly challenging, with moments of both triumph and loss that test our resolve. At times, it can feel overwhelming, but each victory, no matter how small, reminds us of why we keep going. It is arduous work, but when the first terns arrive and you later witness a chick, no larger than a cotton ball, stretching its beak skyward, begging for food, all fatigue is forgotten.

Still, each morning during nesting season, I step onto the dunes with a mix of hope and anxiety, scanning the protected area for signs of new life and, all too often, new threats. While these nesting grounds in Mission Bay are among the most productive for the entire species, safety is not guaranteed for the terns. Their population size continues to decline, and the challenges seem to grow. Beyond natural predators, human disturbances pose an increasing threat. Despite posted signs and protective fencing, we frequently find evidence of trespassing and even vandalism.

But nothing came close to what we experienced late in last year's breeding season. On a day that I had planned to spend with my husband and three daughters enjoying time away from the demands of conservation, I woke up to back-to-back alerts on my phone. It was the kind of nightmare scenario that fueled my anxiety during nesting season. Someone, or perhaps multiple people, had ignored the signs, breached two fences, and vandalized the nesting site. My heart sank as I saw the photos flooding in, each one worse than the last. The damage was immense.

Monitoring equipment, painstakingly placed to track the colony's progress, had been thrown into the bay. The clay tile refuges, which provide essential shelter for the vulnerable young, had all been shattered, and the large interpretive sign—an important symbol of why this area matters—was torn apart, its message lost in the chaos. A few perfectly camouflaged eggs in the speckled sand were inevitably stepped on. The last fledglings were forced to leave the site before they were fully ready, and we can only hope they survived the premature departure.

In an instant, the day I had hoped to savor with my family turned into an urgent call to action. The weight of what had happened hit me hard, but the drive to protect this place, these birds, surged. Despite the hardships that resulted from the vandalism, the response from the local community, and notably our great City Rangers and Biologists, has been nothing short of inspiring. We were overwhelmed by the outpouring of support, with many reaching out to ask how they could help. An influx of volunteers joined our efforts, and we received generous donations to replace the damaged equipment, including a new interpretive sign to reestablish the message of the area's importance. The community's overwhelming commitment to protecting this vital nesting site has been a powerful, heartening reminder of the collective strength we possess in conservation.

Least Tern chicks are camouflaged for huddling on open sand. Photo by Karen Straus.

Protecting these birds isn't just the responsibility of one person, one organization, or one season; it's a shared responsibility, a fight for survival that depends on all of us to take part. For conservation efforts to succeed, we need the support of the entire community that extends beyond the hands-on work we do on the ground. The public plays an essential role in preserving these delicate habitats, and responsible recreation is critical in that process. We encourage everyone who enjoys Mission Bay's natural beauty to respect posted signs, stay clear of protected nesting areas, and be mindful of their surroundings. By working together, we can ensure a safer environment for the terns and for all those who appreciate this incredible space.

Every day, we push forward, advocating for stronger protections and supporting the habitats that these terns depend on. Even when the road feels uncertain, it's clear that without our continued efforts, their future would be in even greater jeopardy. Each chick that stretches its wings for the first time, each fledgling that soars over the bay is a testament to the power of what we do. It's a reminder that, despite the challenges, there is hope these birds will return next year, and that we will be here, ready to welcome them home.

A Ternwatcher's Diary

By Jenna Asperslag, Veteran Ternwatcher

"To get to the protected site, I go through a locked gate and walk the short sandy path to the blind set up just outside the second gate. I settle into a camping stool, binoculars and camera in hand. The goal of the day is to watch the site, count how many California Least Terns I see, how many chicks and fledglings, and—most importantly—how many predators frequent the area during my two-hour shift."

Above: The Coast Woolly Head. Right: Nuttall's Lotus in bloom.

Two adult California Least Terns on the sandy ground with a small, well-camouflaged chick between them. All photos by Jenna Asperslag.

It's a bright, sunny day on Mission Bay as I wait on the shore to board a pontoon boat headed for FAA Island, one of four California Least Tern nesting sites managed by the San Diego Bird Alliance. I'm here with a group of volunteers for a site-restoration event. These events take place anytime from fall to spring, but today it's spring. The Elegant Terns have returned, screeching above and chasing each other in pairs. The Royal Terns that stayed the winter have donned their black caps again, but it will still be a few weeks before the California Least Terns make their appearance. Today, we'll help prepare for their return.

We load up onto the pontoon and set off across the bay, wind whipping loudly around us as we introduce ourselves to each other and hold scattered conversations over the noise of the boat. When we reach the island's small single dock, we tumble out to begin working. Closed to the public, FAA is a small island, just one, tall, bowling-pin–shaped building walled off in the center, surrounded by sandy vegetation and a short boardwalk. Because this island, like all the others in Mission Bay, was built from dredged soil once at the bottom of a wetland, weeds burst through its fertile soil and layers of sand.

Our goal today is to remove those weeds, focusing on certain high-priority sections of the island where the terns have attempted to nest in the past, to give them nice, sandy fields to scrape their nests into the ground. We're alerted to a few special plants to keep our eyes peeled for—rare, native species that we don't want to pull—Coast Woolly Heads and Nuttall's Lotus. The folks from San Diego Bird Alliance show us where the gloves are, a few tools we can use, and a big box of yummy snacks if we get hungry throughout the morning. And then, we're off!

The morning starts quietly, with everyone in their own corners silently pulling weeds and piling them on tarps placed around the space. But as the day goes on, little conversations break out between strangers. First chatting about these pesky weeds, how hard certain ones are to pull out. Laughing and complimenting each other when someone lumbers over to the tarp with a particularly large bundle. Then moving to more typical small talk—What do you do? Have you been to one of these events before?

I love the camaraderie that comes from events like these—befriending people I may never see again because we're all on our hands and knees in the sand, pulling invasive plants out of the ground to help this tiny little bird find a place to start a family. It feels weird to say, but you really get into it, eyes darting all over to find your next patch of burr clover to tackle.

A group of teens who are here to get their volunteer hours for school excitedly team up to transport full tarps of weeds back to the boat. A few college students gather around the snacks and chat about college life and what they plan to do when they graduate. A couple shows their young kid a mama Mallard swimming close to the rocky shore with a flotilla of fluffy babies in tow behind her. Everyone takes turns peeking around the corner at the Killdeer sitting diligently on her nest, vocalizing loudly if anyone ventures too close. Someone finds a well-hidden Horned Lark nest, and we mark it with a flag, so no one scours that area.

The hours seem to fly by, and in no time at all, we're packing up, waiting by the boardwalk for our turn to take the boat back. One glance around the island, and it's clear how much progress we've made. Just a few hours ago, this place was overrun with clovers and grasses and telegraph weed. Now it's the perfect habitat to hide a sand-colored Least Tern chick. And in just a few weeks, the terns will be flying back into town, ready to start their new families.

* * * * *

This morning couldn't be more different than the one I spent at FAA Island. When I arrive at Mariner's Point on a chilly June day, the bay is blanketed with classic June gloom marine layer. There's a chance I'll see a patch of blue sky above during my double shift of Ternwatching this morning, but I'm prepared to mark "Overcast" on the ArcGIS® survey I've pulled up on my phone.

To get to the protected site, I go through a locked gate and walk the short sandy path to the blind set up just outside the second gate. I settle into a camping stool, binoculars and camera in hand. The goal of the day is to watch the site, count how many California Least Terns I see, how many chicks and fledglings, and—most importantly—how many predators frequent the area during my two-hour shift. I have my ArcGIS® survey to fill out for each predator observed, as well as the phone number for Brooke Gullatta, the USDA Wildlife Services Specialist who monitors the site.

There are several potential predators I could encounter. Some are of higher concern than others. A Western Gull flying over, seeming uninterested in the nest site, is not necessarily worth calling Wildlife Services about. But it's still worth noting in the survey how the Least Terns react to the flyover. Do they mob the gull? Do they flush, momentarily abandoning their nests? These data help the conservationists monitoring the site to implement appropriate protective measures.

Certain species—Peregrine Falcons and Great Blue Herons, for example—are urgent enough that I call Brooke first and take notes in the survey second. She's monitoring all the sites in Mission Bay, but since Mariner's Point has historically been the most successful for the Least Terns, she relies on us to alert her to any urgent situations, and then she decides whether or not to come to the site.

At first, it feels like it will be a lonely morning, sitting by myself in the cold, constantly scanning the area around me. But the birds quickly become my company. It's springtime, so the terns aren't the only ones starting their families. A young House Finch begs for food from its parent on the chain link fence in front of me. A dove makes repeated trips to bring nest material into a bush not a yard away from me, then lands on top of the blind. I can see the shadow of its little feet scampering around above me.

And of course, there are the terns! The soundtrack of my morning is the constant high-pitched, squeaky calls of Least Terns flying overhead.

I watch through binoculars as the tiniest little fluffball scampers across the sand toward an adult landing with a fish. Another adult wiggles back and forth as it tries to sit on top of a chick that's maybe a little too big at this stage. I've watched these birds every weekend for more than a month now, seeing them go from choosing their nest sites, to sitting diligently on eggs, to being chased around by their own hungry chicks.

There's a small binder in the blind, which contains information on the site, including helpful tips on what predators to look for and how to ID different tern species. There's also a small field notebook and a pen. Skimming through, I read through the recent entries. Notes on which nests seem to be active. Counts of how many total birds each person saw on their shift. Words of caution that a certain Peregrine keeps visiting at a certain time, and where to look for it. One volunteer excitedly reports seeing a chick for the first time.

It's a different kind of camaraderie from pulling weeds in the sand. Fewer spontaneous conversations—though I still do chat with Brooke on the slow mornings to learn about how the other nest sites are doing. But still, flipping through the notebook and seeing just how many names there are and how many people like me dedicated a chunk of their day to help these birds makes me feel part of a special community.

The chains on the outer gate jingle, and I look back to see that the next shift's volunteer has arrived to take over. I pack my things and vacate the blind as the volunteer arrives, exchanging a few words as I go. Tips on which nest to look at to find chicks, warnings of which predators are lurking this morning, and then I'm off.

Terns are some of my favorite birds. They're loud, they're pointy, they're both graceful and chaotic as you watch them in flight. The Least Terns are so small, their chicks so fluffy—you can't not root for them. I'm glad I'm able to spend my mornings helping them out in every way I can.

The long wings of a California Least Tern landing in a field of Beach Primrose at Mariner's Point.

One of many tarps filled with pulled plants. Taken at a cleanup event at Mariner's Point in March 2025.

By keeping an eye on nests and documenting observed predators in Mission Bay, Ternwatcher volunteers help our endangered California Least Terns have more productive nesting seasons. The Ternwatchers program runs from April to September, and you can set your own hours. ***Training for this season takes place in May***, including a required virtual session and an optional in-person Survey123 session. Check the events calendar for dates. Let our Conservation Manager, Cristina Santa Maria, know you're interested by emailing her at **csantamaria@sandiegobirdalliance.org.**

An Elegant Advocacy

West Ski Island has become a hotspot for a host of seabird species—now including the Elegant Terns. The challenges are real.

by Andrew Meyer, Director of Conservation

We've passed the equinox and are coming into the warmth and sun of San Diego. That can only mean one thing—March Madness? Saying goodbye to Brants until next winter? Spring wildflowers? Memorial Day cooking? Sure, but it also means we need to redouble our efforts to protect Elegant Terns if they nest in Mission Bay as they did last summer.

More than 15,000 Elegant Terns (ELTE) used West Ski Island to nest last year! All those ELTEs flying back and forth across Ocean Beach, Mission Beach, and Pacific Beach to catch fish for their mates and chicks, to keep the colony flourishing was an "unprecedented phenomenon" as Savannah Stallings, our Conservation Advocacy Coordinator called it. That's when we first rang the alarm that these new immigrants were not getting the protection they needed in our city.

There are four protected nesting sites for California Least Terns (CLTEs) in Mission Bay, which the San Diego Bird Alliance and thousands of volunteers help to protect, restore, and share each year. But West Ski Island has been an established seabird breeding colony only since 2021, and other larids besides CLTEs nest there, including Royal Terns, Caspian Terns, Forster's Terns, and Black Skimmers. The numbers skyrocketed last summer for Elegant Terns, when tern monitors and the public recorded them nesting here beginning in June and still bringing fish to juveniles in October. It was an awesome spectacle to see thousands of terns swinging in and out and around West Ski Island, and it raises the bar for us, especially in such a recreation-focused area, to make sure they have a successful nesting season and "re-tern." West Ski Island is not a protected nesting preserve and faces significant disturbances from boating on busy weekends.

Last year, after two days of big fireworks shows in Mission Bay, we found dead adult terns, chicks, and eggs washed up along the shores of Kendall–Frost Marsh. We've identified two major threats—thunderboat races and fireworks—and we have been working with partners and the public since last summer to address them. The island still isn't protected, so the fight isn't over, but we've made progress on each of these important issues.

Thunderboat Races. We have given a series of recommendations to the Mission Bay Park Committee and the Parks and Recreation Department, demanding that events in Mission Bay, including "grandfathered" events, get a review from the Committee to be sure that new environmental disturbances and opportunities are addressed. We raised red flags and shared information with the Coastal Commission about the thunderboat races, which occur within the CLTE nesting season and blow right past West Ski Island. The Coastal Commission required biological monitoring last year to inform more stringent review, mitigation, and avoidance measures for this year. We must hold them to it!

Fireworks. Fireworks have gotten a lot of visibility, too. We worked with the Mission Bay Park Committee on this issue, and by December the Committee voted 8 to 1 to drastically reduce or eliminate fireworks over Mission Bay. Our advocacy was echoed by dog lovers, parents, air-quality experts, veterans with PTSD, and water-quality experts, who all added strong arguments about the unacceptability of fireworks in the area. In January, Council President LaCava joined our position and said he supported phasing out fireworks in Mission Bay. Coastkeeper and Coastal Environmental Rights Foundation are honing in on the water-quality impacts of the fireworks shows through lawsuits. The pressure is on Sea World and the City to make a decision based on protecting wildlife and water quality, and to find a new and better way to celebrate July 4th this summer.

If you want to help the San Diego Bird Alliance take aggressive stances like these to protect birds and other wildlife in our community, please join us for advocacy training, conservation committee discussions, and volunteer action—we can make progress through united actions.

West Ski Island has been an established seabird breeding colony only since 2020, and other larids besides California Least Terns nest there, including Royal Terns, Caspian Terns, Forster's Terns, Black Skimmers, and Western Gulls. The numbers skyrocketed last summer for Elegant Terns, when tern monitors and the public recorded them nesting here beginning in June and still bringing fish to juveniles in October.

Top: Royal Terns in ritual courtship. Photo by Ed Henry

Left: Elegant Tern flock rising above West Ski Island by Tom Ford-Hutchinson

Above: Elegant Tern by DS

IDENTIFYING OUR TERNS

Thalasseus elegans

ELEGANT TERN

IUCN NEAR-THREATENED

Length: 17″ (39–42 cm)
Wingspan: 30 – 32″ (76 – 81 cm)
Weight: 9 oz. (260 g)

FUN FACT

These terns are a Pacific Coast specialty, with their entire population breeding in a small handful of colonies in Southern California and Baja California, Mexico.

WHERE TO FIND THEM

They nest in the South Bay Salt Works and sometimes in Mission Bay's West Ski Island in the summer.

Hydroprogne caspia

CASPIAN TERN

STABLE

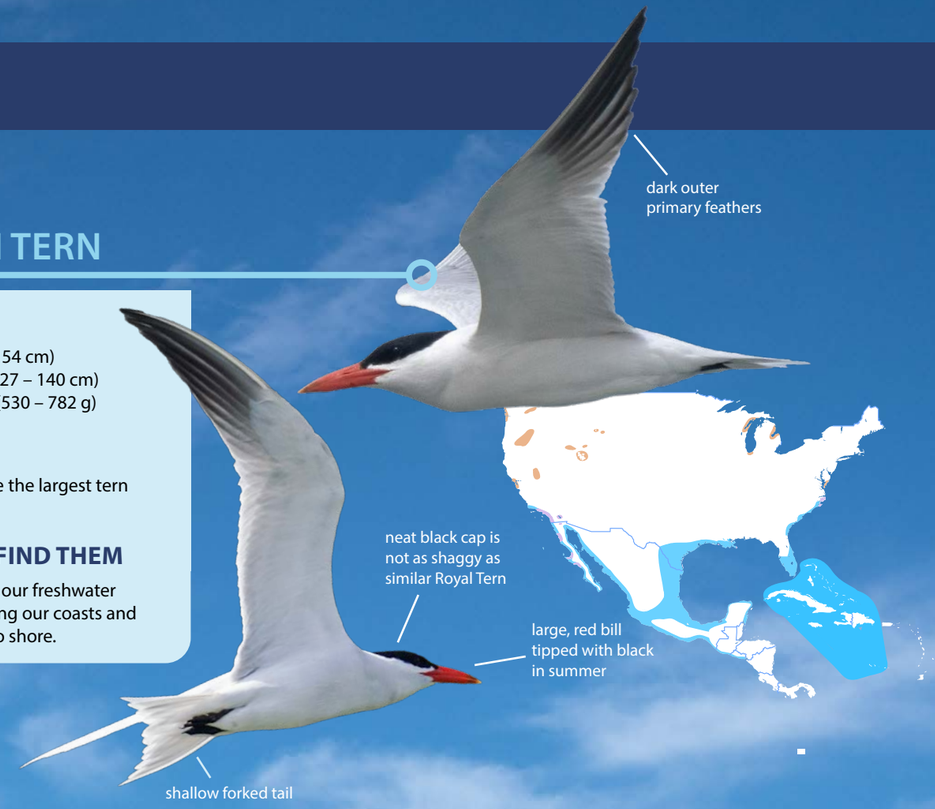
Length: 21″ (47 – 54 cm)
Wingspan: 50″ (127 – 140 cm)
Weight: 22.4 oz. (530 – 782 g)

FUN FACT

Caspian Terns are the largest tern in the world

WHERE TO FIND THEM

Look for them in our freshwater reservoirs, or along our coasts and wetlands close to shore.



Thalasseus maximus

ROYAL TERN

STABLE

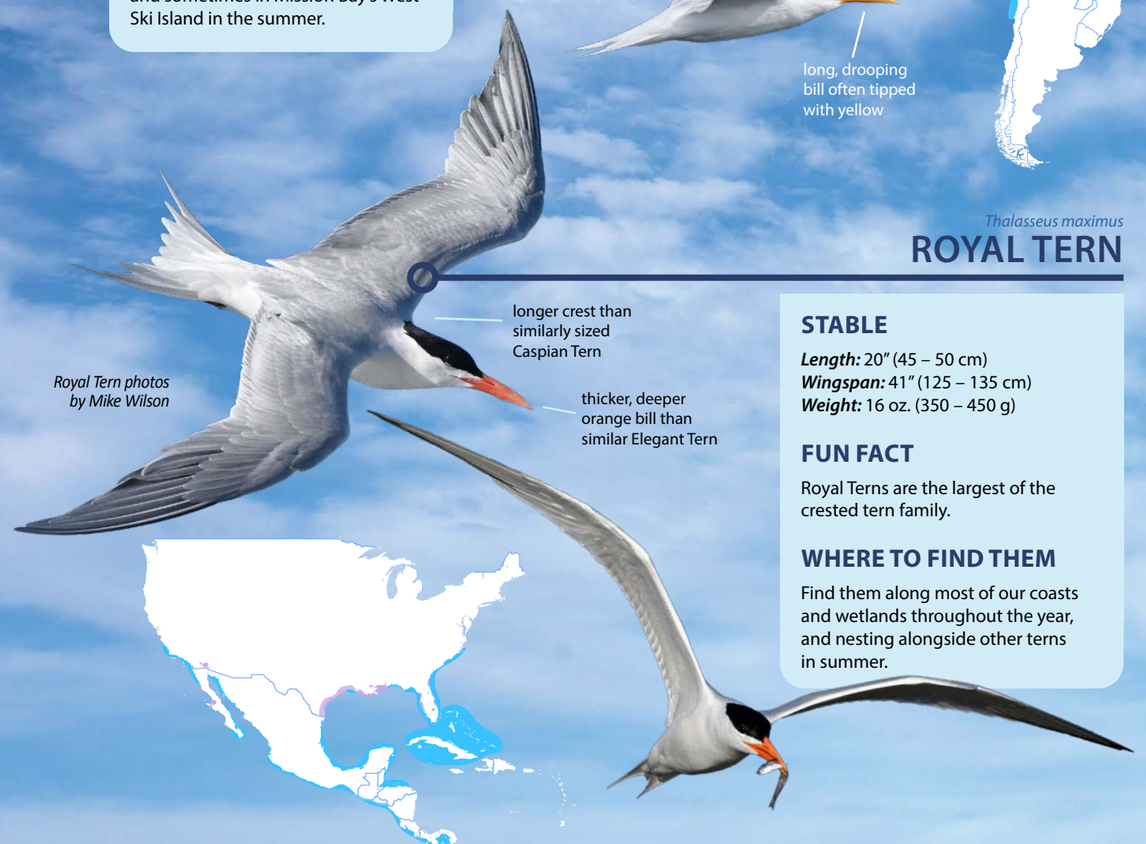
Length: 20″ (45 – 50 cm)
Wingspan: 41″ (125 – 135 cm)
Weight: 16 oz. (350 – 450 g)

FUN FACT

Royal Terns are the largest of the crested tern family.

WHERE TO FIND THEM

Find them along most of our coasts and wetlands throughout the year, and nesting alongside other terns in summer.



Royal Tern photos by Mike Wilson

Gelochelidon nilotica vanrossemi

GULL-BILLED TERN

USFWS BIRD OF CONSERVATION CONCERN

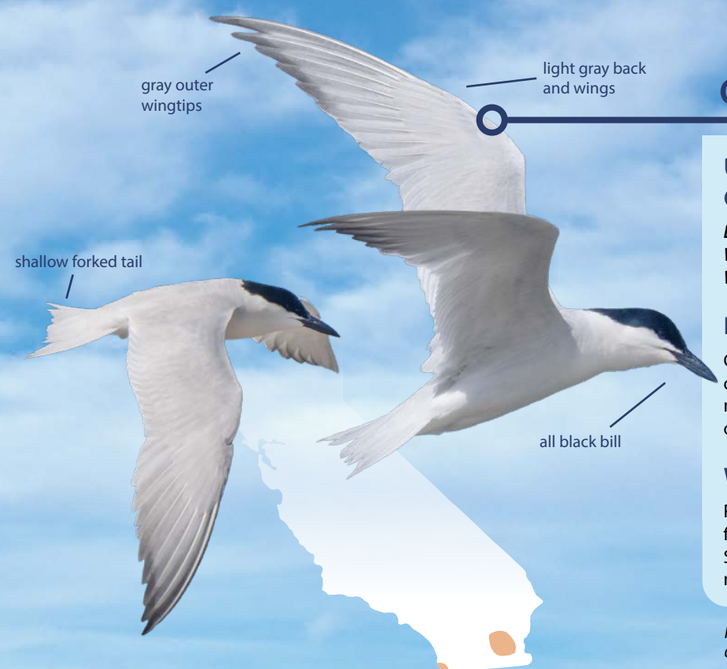
Length: 14″ (33 – 38 cm)
Wingspan: 34″ (85 – 115 cm)
Weight: 6 oz. (160 – 369 g)

FUN FACT

Gull-Billed Terns don't dive for fish like our other terns; instead, they hunt mostly invertebrates or predate on other small vertebrates.

WHERE TO FIND THEM

Perhaps our rarest local tern, you can find them foraging the shorelines of San Diego in summer. Small numbers nest in South Bay.



Photos by Jenna Asperslag unless otherwise credited.

LEGEND: BREEDING RANGE NON-BREEDING RANGE YEAR-ROUND RANGE

California Least Tern by Ed Henry

Sterna antillarum browni

CALIFORNIA LEAST TERN

white forehead

yellow bill tipped with black

forked tail

ENDANGERED

Length: 9″ (21 – 23 cm)
Wingspan: 20″ (48 – 53 cm)
Weight: 1.5 oz. (40 – 50 g)

FUN FACT

The oldest recorded Least Tern was at least 24 years old.

WHERE TO FIND THEM

Look for our smallest tern diving for fish in coastal waters and along our beaches.

Sterna forsteri

FORSTER'S TERN

USFWS BIRD OF CONSERVATION CONCERN

Length: 13″ (33 – 36 cm)
Wingspan: 26.5″ (64 – 70 cm)
Weight: 6 oz. (130 – 190 g)

FUN FACT

The only tern species that hangs out almost entirely in North America, year round.

WHERE TO FIND THEM

Find them hanging around and fishing in coastal wetlands or inland reservoir lakes in San Diego County.

pale, slender wings

long, deeply forked tail

slender, orange bill tipped with black

Rynchops niger

BLACK SKIMMER

long, slender wings

all dark on top, pale underneath

lower mandible noticeably longer than upper

USFWS BIRD OF CONSERVATION CONCERN

Length: 18″ (40 – 50 cm)
Wingspan: 44″ (112 cm)
Weight: 11 oz. (265 – 365 g)

FUN FACT

Black Skimmers skim the surface of the water using their long lower mandible to catch fish.

WHERE TO FIND THEM

In summer, they nest intermixed in large tern colonies throughout the county. The rest of the year, look for them in Mission Bay, especially near Kendall-Frost Marsh.

Larus occidentalis

WESTERN GULL

broader wings than tern relatives

pink legs and feet

thick yellow bill with red *(gonydeal)* spot, less pointed than terns

dark gray wings

USFWS BIRD OF CONSERVATION CONCERN

Length: 25″ (56 – 66 cm)
Wingspan: 51 – 57″ (130 – 144 cm)
Weight: 35.2 oz. (1050 – 1250 g)

FUN FACT

Western Gull is the only gull that breeds in San Diego County with their range restricted to the Pacific Coast.

WHERE TO FIND THEM

Find them just about everywhere along or near our coastlines.

The Birds of Conservation Concern 2024 List (BCC 2021) identifies the migratory and non-migratory bird species (beyond those already designated as federally threatened or endangered) that represent our [USFWS] highest conservation priorities. The list is based on an assessment of several factors, including population abundance and trends, threats on breeding and nonbreeding grounds and size of breeding and nonbreeding ranges.

Terns, gulls, and closely related birds such as skimmers and noddies are all included in the avian family **Laridae**. Most terns are members of one sub-family, the **Stearninae**, with 41 species. They are characterized by a lighter build than gulls, with long, pointed wings, and generally having thin, red to yellow bills. Most are skilled fishers that dive for their prey. Many are extraordinary migrators, such as the champion **Arctic Tern**, which travels from pole to pole, mostly over open ocean. Arctic Terns are found far off the coast of Southern California on their return flight to the Arctic. The **Black Skimmer** and **Western Gull** are included here as representatives of the full *Laridae* family that live and nest in San Diego County.

LEGEND: BREEDING RANGE NON-BREEDING RANGE YEAR-ROUND RANGE

S.O.S. Save Our Seabirds

Ultimately, all pelagic and coastal seabirds face serious challenges to their survival, both in our region and globally

by Lesley Handa, SDBA Lead Ornithologist

Seabirds are majestic, charismatic, and iconic. With their epic migrations, mysterious lives at sea, and extraordinarily long lifespans, they are the stuff of lore and legend, capturing our imagination like few other birds on Earth. Who, for example, can resist following the ongoing saga of Wisdom, a Laysan Albatross, who at 74 years old is mothering yet another chick on Midway Atoll?

Many people travel thousands of miles worldwide and spend large sums of money to observe seabirds, but we can see many species for free year-round in San Diego because we are lucky to be situated in the Pacific Flyway migration route along California's coast. Unfortunately, these birds must compete for the same natural habitats that we enjoy. As a result, seabirds are frequently disturbed or displaced, with nowhere else to go. Worldwide, seabird populations have suffered cascading declines of 70% since the 1950s.

Seabirds face many conservation challenges for survival in San Diego and worldwide. Both *pelagic* seabirds—those who spend all their lives on the ocean, except when nesting—and *coastal* seabirds—those who live on the land at or near the shoreline—depend on the oceans for their food. Due to the climate crisis, availability of this vital food—including fish and other marine animals and plants—is variable and unpredictable, presenting myriad complicated problems for seabirds. As oceans continue to warm at a rapid rate globally, the warmer temperatures promote harmful algal blooms that increase the likelihood of disease outbreaks. Sadly, the climate record for high marine temperatures that was set in 2023 was broken yet again in 2024.

A recurring Pacific Ocean climate pattern raises the ocean temperature and affects atmospheric circulation; this pattern causes fish to migrate to cooler waters or to die off in large numbers. This pattern, known as the El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO), has been occurring more frequently, potentially drastically reducing food availability for seabirds. In the Winter 2024 *Sketches*, we reported that about 3.2 million Common Murres had perished from the 2016 marine heatwave event, but the death toll is now estimated at 4 million—about half of the Alaskan population.

Seabirds indicate the health of the coastal and marine environment; it is crucial to retain this complex ecosystem habitat not only for the survival of coastal shorebirds and seabirds, but also for data collection through programs such as the USFWS (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service) BeachCOMBERS. The BeachCOMBERS program collects data on seabird carcasses on San Diego and other coastal Southern California ungroomed shoreline and informs us about how the ocean is changing.

Extreme temperature events can have catastrophic effects. For instance, in June 2021, farther up the Pacific coast in Washington and British Columbia, the lowest tides of the year occurred during extreme atmospheric temperatures. This devastating coincidence caused the deaths of millions of mussels and barnacles, food for Oystercatchers, Surfbirds, and Eiders.

In addition to temperature and climate, relative levels of carbon dioxide and oxygen can dramatically affect ecosystems. Higher levels of carbon dioxide in the ocean increase ocean acidity, which also disrupts the food chain. In a highly acidic ocean, the calcium carbonate shells of marine invertebrates dissolve. High levels of carbon dioxide can also mean lower levels of oxygen, causing *hypoxia*, or lack of oxygen, in coastal areas. Some 2021 studies showed dangerously low oxygen levels that would stress or kill fish and crabs. If these marine animals aren't available to feed seabirds during breeding season, parents and their chicks are imperiled. Chicks can starve, or parents may need to leave chicks unattended for extended fishing or foraging trips, leaving the chicks vulnerable to predation.

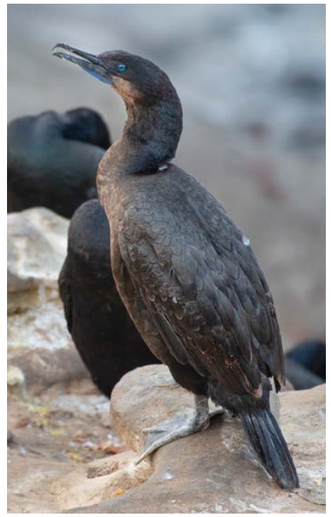
Another challenge to seabirds, as well as to other birds (and other animals), is the global highly pathogenic avian influenza, HPAI. This highly contagious and virulent H5N1 strain has been on the rise since its arrival in 2021, causing dramatic declines in seabird populations (as well as seals, sea lions, dolphins, and other marine wildlife). The climate's warmer winters and earlier springs may be accelerating the global spread of this infection by causing bird migration patterns to shift, as well as other factors enhancing the spread of the virus.

In the Pacific Ocean, population declines of 24,000 Cape Cormorants and 57,000 Pelicans were recorded in Peru. While HPAI and other virulent diseases afflict seabirds in large numbers, our partners work the front line responding to these catastrophes. For instance, International Bird Rescue tirelessly rescues and rehabilitates seabirds, and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife conducts research to investigate these deadly diseases.

Another concern is global sea level rise, which is accelerated by melting polar ice caps. As the sea rises, the shoreline shrinks, reducing the amount of coastal land available for seabirds to breed. Many seabirds nest on the ground of low-lying coastal areas, vulnerable to the rising seas. To plan for the survival of seabird species in coastal areas, we must provide undisturbed spaces in the required habitats for seabirds to nest and supplemental predator control where needed.

Ideally, we would be able to conserve existing natural breeding habitats, but we will need to consider alternative breeding habitats, as well, to provide seabirds with as many options as possible. Two promising examples in the United States are the artificial floating islands for the Common Tern in Ocean City, Maryland, and a nesting platform for the Seaside Heermann's Gulls in Monterey, California. Locally, in response to the newly colonized West Ski Island in Mission Bay, which hosted 16,000 breeding terns in the summer of 2024, we greatly appreciate the collective effort of hardworking biologists Robert Patton and Jennifer Jackson, Mark Berninger at the City of San Diego and his staff, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, USFWS, and California Coastal Commission, with whom we are working to secure the future for these birds in Mission Bay.

Western Gull chick by DS



Royal Terns by Gerry Tietje; Brandt's Cormorants (right) by DS

Human–wildlife conflict remains a significant threat to seabird conservation, both worldwide and locally. Seabirds are often scapegoated for human-caused issues, with cormorants a frequent target. In San Diego's La Jolla Cove, we had been able to protect two Birds of Conservation Concern— Brandt's Cormorants and Western Gulls. Unfortunately, these two seabird species are now vulnerable again to the City of San Diego's spraying of a toxic bioagent on the cliffs directly over the Matlahuayl State Marine Reserve where these birds breed and live. This assault arose in response to pressure from local businesses to reduce the smell of the wildlife there, but Brandt's Cormorants have been breeding at La Jolla Cove since before the 1930s, when they were first documented there. Of special concern is that La Jolla Cove is the only breeding colony for this species in southern California outside the Channel Islands. In addition, La Jolla Cove is one of the few natural habitats where the Western Gull nests. We must act to prevent this toxic assault on these vulnerable seabirds.

The seabirds that inhabit Mission Bay in the spring and summer are also continually assaulted by human–wildlife conflict due to human recreation. For instance, seabird breeding occurs through July at Mission Bay. Last year, the estimated 16,000 terns on West Ski Island were subject to a fireworks show on July 3 and an hour-long series of fireworks shows on July 4, resulting in a mass panic flight of more than half of the terns, and an hour after the show was over, dead tern chicks and eggs washed up on the shores of the Kendall–Frost Marsh Reserve.

With so many conservation challenges for seabirds, we ask for your compassion and understanding of the needs of these beautiful birds as our world changes rapidly. We must meaningfully address the climate crisis to reduce carbon emissions and to manage oceanic resources for seabirds. To help ensure they have a future in San Diego and in our world, please join us by helping to provide them with the disturbance-free space and habitats that will allow them to live their lives here year-round.

Mission Bay fireworks that delighted thousands of people led to the deaths of dozens of Elegant Terns and their chicks, plus the loss of many eggs. Photo by Tom Ford-Hutchinson

SDGE Loves Our Terns

Their work at the Mariner's Point CLTE nesting site sets the stage for a special season

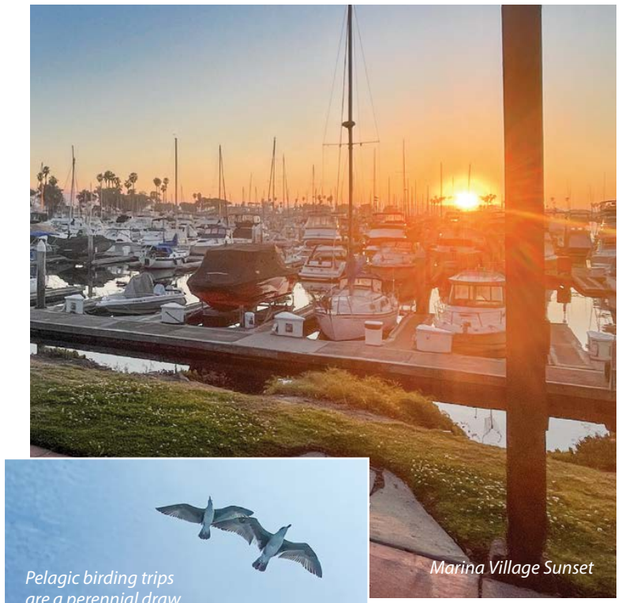
"For the few thousand California Least Terns that we have left, Mariner's Point in Mission Bay is one of the best places for this endangered species. And for this community partnership, it's one of the best places for us to pitch in together to give back to the bay for the habitat, water quality, recreation space, and so much more that it provides."

Travis Kemnitz, Executive Director of the San Diego Bird Alliance

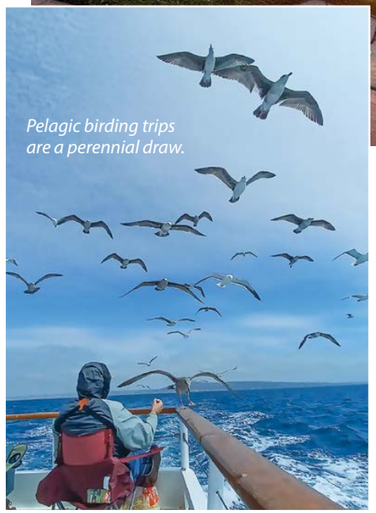
Nearly 100 SDGE volunteers joined the 13th annual restoration event at Mariner's Point, **clearing 40 cubic yards of vegetation** to prepare habitat for the endangered California Least Tern. The uplifting community effort also celebrated the unveiling of a new interpretive sign. In attendance were City Council President LaCava, Councilmember Campbell, SDGE President Scott Crider. San Diego Bird Alliance was well represented by Travis Kemnitz, Executive Director, and Cristina Santa Maria, Conservation Manager. Other participating staff were Coral Weaver, Conservation Coordinator; Kelcy Coleman, Conservation Coordinator; Karina Ornelas, Conservation Outreach Coordinator; and Conservation Assistants Stephanie Becerra, Brandi Sanchez, and Charles Sanders.

San Diego Bird Festival 2025 *Bigger and Better than Ever*

by Rebecca Kennedy, Communications Manager



Marina Village Sunset



Pelagic birding trips are a perennial draw.

The 2025 San Diego Bird Festival, held from February 26 to March 2, was a hit!

The festival broke all kinds of records, drawing a huge crowd and making a big splash in the birding world. The festival not only celebrated the wonders of birds but also highlighted the importance of conservation and collaboration throughout our region.

This year's festival was bigger and better than ever, with 1,700 birders and nature lovers showing up to take part. The field trips were especially popular, with 1,204 attendees exploring San Diego's top birding spots. A big thank you to all the volunteers who helped this event take off. They logged a remarkable 659 hours just during the festival week! More than 100 leaders and presenters engaged participants with their knowledge and expertise. All in all, participants visited 66 different locations, spotting 216 different bird species.

A record number of exhibitors attended, with birding businesses from all around the world showcasing their products and services. We were excited to have exhibitors visiting all the way from Uganda, Ecuador, Panama, and Australia! We were also joined by many of our incredible community partners at booths, as presenters, and as field trip leaders.

Festival Highlights

Amy Tan's Keynote Address—One of the biggest highlights was our conversation with the amazing Amy Tan, moderated by Tammah Watts. The award-winning author spoke about her life, her writing, and how birds have inspired her work. It was an unforgettable conversation, blending nature, storytelling, and our mutual love for birds.

Free Community Days—On March 1 and 2, the festival opened its doors to the public. This was a great chance for people to dive into the birding world with hands-on activities such as nature journaling, birdwatching, and the always fun "Big Sit." The exhibit halls and street fair were buzzing with excitement, and it felt as though the entire community was involved.

Camp Surfbird—Camp Surfbird was a total hit! This overnight camp gave teens (ages 13–17) the chance to bond with other young birders, participate in festival activities, and explore San Diego's birding hotspots. It was a fantastic way to inspire the next generation of bird lovers.

Juliana Soto Patiño led a presentation of neotropical biodiversity at The NAT.

Spanish-Language Programs—We were proud to offer several bilingual programs, including a presentation on the rediscovery of the California Black Rail in Baja California wetlands.

The festival isn't just about having a good time; it also plays a large role in supporting our efforts to protect local birds and their habitats. All the proceeds from the event go toward conservation, education, and habitat-restoration projects, which are crucial for keeping our region's birds and wildlife thriving.

With record attendance, an incredible mix of local and international exhibitors, and a huge range of activities, this year's event was a clear reminder of how powerful and inspiring the birding community can be when we come together. We can't wait to see what next year's festival will bring—we hope even more species, more bird lovers, and more ways to help protect our feathered friends!

Mark your calendars! Next year's festival will be held from February 25–March 1, 2026.