

Least Terns Nestling in Clarendon County, S.C.

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On 27 June 1993, I discovered a Least Tern (*Sterna antillarum*) nesting colony approximately 180 km inland from the Atlantic coast, about 2 km E of Lake Marion, and approximately 3 km S of Rimini in Clarendon Co., SC. I estimated there to be 30 terns including about 10 juveniles present at the colony. I approached the colony on foot, and the adults actively defended by dive-bombing me. None of the juveniles left the ground, but they appeared to be near fledging as they were the same size as the adults and fully feathered. The area consisted of dredged bare soil and several large rain-fed puddles. Least Terns incubate for 3 weeks, and young fledge in about 24 days (Potter et al. 1980); therefore, I estimate the initiation of nesting at this colony occurred in mid-May.

I had earlier observed Least Terns on the property in numbers of no more than 5 on 13 May, 29 May, 1 June, and 25 June. I observed these birds at 2 small impoundments nearby while doing bird scans of these units. I had not seen the area containing the colony since winter, and I assumed that the terns I saw were not breeding. I observed terns successfully fishing in these two impoundments on several occasions. The two impoundments contained largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*), bluegill (*Lepomis macrochirus*), pumpkinseed (*Lepomis gibbosus*), grass pickerel (*Esox americanus*), and golden shiner (*Notemigonus crysoleucas*) (J.J. Isely, SC Fish and Wildl. Coop. Res. Unit, unpubl. data).

After I discovered the colony, I also saw Least Terns on the property on 2 and 3 August. At this time the terns were mostly using an impoundment which at the time had large sand bars and shallow water. They rested on the sand bars and foraged in the impoundment, and to a lesser extent, the adjacent impoundment. I did not see any terns where I had originally located the colony. There were no less than 35 birds present on 2 August, including roughly 10 juveniles. The last date I saw any terns on the property was 3 August. I next visited the area on 5 September, so they abandoned the property between 3 August and 5 September.

The colony was using a tract of private land which was mined for clay and is currently being restored into a complex of wetlands to be managed for wildlife. The unit where the terns nested has since been developed into a moist-soil emergent wetland by spreading and contouring soil and planting wetland vegetation. Renesting there seems unlikely.

Least Terns are on the state threatened list in South Carolina (South Carolina Nongame and Heritage Trust Database 1990), and this is the first report of Least Terns nesting in the upper coastal plain in South Carolina since 1967 (Post and Gauthreaux 1989) when Least Terns nested on an unpaved roadbed during the construction of the Interstate 95 bridge over Lake Marion, near Santee in Orangeburg county (Post 1967). This colony was approximately 18 km S of the one near Rimini. The only other reported inland colonies in South Carolina were on a small island on Lake Murray in 1960 and 1961 (Chamberlain 1960, Smith 1961). The Rimini colony is only the fourth ever reported in the upper coastal

plain of South Carolina, the first in 26 years, and the first to report fledged young. The closest Least Tern colonies to Rimini, in recent years, were on the roofs of Amoco Chemicals (1989–1993) and a Technical College (1991–1993), both in central Berkeley County, approximately 65 km SE (South Carolina Colonial Waterbird Database 1993).

Savereno and Murphy (in prep.) propose that an increase in nesting on peagravel roofs and in fewer larger colonies in South Carolina may be a result of a deficiency of suitable nesting habitat. Least Terns nesting inland could be another indicator of a lack of suitable nesting sites along the coast. The Cooper and Santee Rivers provide possible corridors for alternative nesting sites inland.

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