

BANDING LEAST TERNS IN FLORIDA

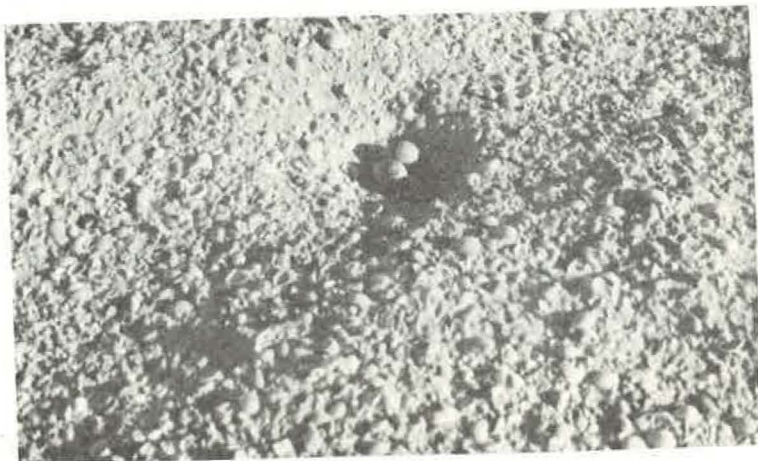
By Jerry F. Pace

Almost everyone has heard of Cocoa, Florida and about the large number of birds we have in winter. In the summer we don't have as many, but even in the summer you wouldn't have too much trouble getting a list of 100 or more species in one day. We don't have too many nesting birds here. One of the main nesting birds is the Least Tern.

During the summer Least Terns are very common around this area. Most of the Least Terns nest on small islands in the Banana and Indian Rivers. Only a few choose to nest on the beaches and other areas. One area on Merritt Island is a real nesting place. Sand was pumped up here to form an area for building houses, but for some reason the houses were not built right away.

Last year the Least Terns nested on this pumped in area and I was able to band 72 immatures during their season. This year the area is still being used by the Least Terns, but it is being prepared for building. On my first visit, May 24, 1962, I found approximately 100 nests in a small area measuring about 50 x 20 yards. Each nest contained from 1 to 3 eggs, but only 6 young were ready to be banded.

On May 28 I again made the 6 mile trip on my bicycle, only to find that all the nests had been destroyed. A road was being built right through the main colony and almost all of the nests were covered with two feet of dirt. However 13 immature Least Terns were found nearby and were banded.



Least Tern's nest on Merritt Island containing 2 eggs

Another small colony was discovered on May 31 about 400 yards away from the main colony. There I found about 20 nests and banded 17 more immature Least Terns.

A Mottled Duck also nests in this area and on June 1 all 10 eggs hatched. Black-necked Stilts were also nesting here.



Black-necked Stilt nest on Merritt Island

Blackbirds, Grackles and Crows gave the Least Terns a great deal of trouble. I found from 20 to 30 eggs that had been destroyed. The Least Terns seemed to object to the presence of the Black-necked Stilts, too.

While I was banding the immature Least Terns I received objections from the adults in the form of their harsh squealing and close diving. This gave me an idea. I made a hand net out of an old torn mist net. The net was 3 feet long and was placed on a loop measuring 16 x 18 inches, with a handle 3 feet long. If I had used the net earlier in the season I would have had much better luck, but by the time I began using the hand net it was too late to catch many birds. The nesting season was almost over and the Least Terns weren't diving close enough. However I did get a couple of tries and managed to catch one adult.

I didn't use any mist nets because it is always windy here - and there is no protection from the wind.

Another visit to this area on June 4 turned up only 7 immature Least Terns. My final visit was on June 9, when I was able to find and band only 4.

On June 10 I started on a bird watching tour of South Florida. Two other ornithologists were traveling with me: Fredric Haerich and Jerry Conken. While we were down in the Keys, we discovered a large colony of Least Terns on the Vaca Keys. We made camp just before dark and were

able to band 12 immature Least Terns while we still had some visibility. During the night we decided to try something new. We used a camping flashlight to search for immature birds. We banded 5 immatures in this way.

In the morning we started banding again. We used a systematic method of searching for immatures hiding on the ground. We covered most of the area this way. We also kept our binoculars on immature Least Terns that were trying to get away by running ahead of us. When 6 or more were spotted running fairly closely together, we would sprint a few hundred yards and capture them when they tried to camouflage themselves. This method really worked fine.

The birds had very little trouble with camouflage because the ground was covered with shells and rocks and they blended right into it. We had to go slowly and look very carefully to find them. One immature escaped by jumping into the water and swimming to a small island. We ended the morning most successfully, with a total of 52 Least Terns banded.

Near this Least Tern colony we discovered a small colony of Roseate Terns. We were able to find only 3 immatures, but several nests were located, each nest containing only one egg.

This year I banded 116 Least Terns, and altogether I have banded 188. So far I haven't had any recoveries, but I hope to hear of some soon.



Area where Roseate Terns nested on the Vaca Keys

306 N. Kentucky Ave., Cocoa, Florida

