

A Brief History of Efforts to Protect the Least Tern
on the Mississippi Coast

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Between twenty-five and thirty years ago, before the development of "the world's longest man-made beach", which runs 28 miles from Biloxi Bay to the Bay of St. Louis, many species of gulls, terns, and shorebirds nested on the unmanicured and little used beaches. After development of the beach, burgeoning tourist industry and enormous growth in human population demanded that all that relocated sand be kept in immaculate condition and so the beach was cleaned by bulldozers and raking machines every week or two. Nesting birds were victimized along with areas of natural vegetation. Few if any birds were successful in their nesting efforts and the result was a gradual decline in the numbers of birds even attempting to nest. The mechanized monoliths had scored an apparent victory.

Several years ago, Ethel Floyd, Past President of MOS and an ardent recorder of avian events, took notice of some small numbers of Least Terns (Sterna albifrons) who were industriously preparing to nest along a section of beach in Gulfport; she contacted the Board of Supervisors of Harrison County who viewed the situation with apathetic amusement, and continued their single-minded efforts to keep Coast beaches free of trash. One might find many an old beer can, or sever an artery on a broken bottle, but never let it be said that any living thing, from sea oat to Least Tern disrupted the monotony of the coastal Sahara. To her everlasting credit, Ethel Floyd is dauntless; when, in the following April, she noted again that Least Terns were back in the same area, she enlisted the aid of MOS past-president Marjorie Cleveland of Gulfport. Armed with the magical influence of a state-wide organization, Ethel and Margie put some real pressure on the Board of Supervisors, until Arian Robinson, Supervisor, Beat 5 agreed to leave the one-mile section of beach for the proliferation of the Least Terns.

A modicum of nesting success was noted that season, 1974, and Mr. Robinson, prior to the nesting season of 1975, directed that signs be erected on the beach, informing the public that Least Terns were nesting and to use caution in the area. There was an immediate outcry from enraged citizenry and owners of commercial enterprises, protesting the loss of one mile of recreational area and deploring the "unsightliness" of the beach, which, as the nesting season progressed, sprouted vegetation which young Least Terns quickly took advantage of, seeking shelter from the sun and the danger of human interlopers.

Meanwhile, conservation minded citizens began to make their feelings known; for a while there existed quite a verbal melee in the pages of the Gulfport Daily Herald, and the meeting of the Board of Supervisors often became a shouting match, some of the supervisors protested in the name of their constituents while Mr. Robinson, having already put his political

future on the line, stuck to his promise to leave the area for the birds.

During the 1975 nesting season, there appeared in a one and one half mile area between Long Beach and Pass Christian, another colony of Least Terns who went about their nesting business with few interruptions, thanks to the lagging efforts of the beach cleaners. As the Gulfport nesting area grew in popular appeal, there began to appear an odd assortment of sticks and flags, each one marking a nest site; this was the work of a number of local residents who took it upon themselves to increase the odds in behalf of the Least Terns. As one who in 1975 marked approximately 350 nests in the Gulfport area, I roughly estimated that there were 1000 nesting pairs in the combined colonies.

Directly after the 1975 nesting season, the beach was returned to the people, nicely cleaned. At the close of the tourist season, Mr. Robinson directed that small islands of vegetation be planted with several varieties of beach grasses, yucca, palms, sea oats, etc., the full effect was attractive and elicited more compliments than detractions, while at the same time providing a possible solution to the problem of blowing sand which is prevalent here during periods of strong south-east winds.

What could be a more natural endeavor for the fledgling Mississippi Coast Audubon Society than that they undertake as their first official conservation project, a complete survey of the nesting colonies. This was done with as much attendant publicity through newspaper and TV as we could muster. We had obtained the cooperation of the supervisors, Billy McDonald and Hue Snowden, whose jurisdictional areas of beach encompassed the one continuous area between Long Beach and Pass Christian. They agreed to leave the colonies free of mechanized disruption during the nesting season. MCAS made and posted a dozen signs in the area, and on 18 May 1976 began the concentrated effort to mark every nest. What a revelation that our survey revealed a total of 2100 nesting pairs of Least Terns on the Gulfport beach, and approximately 2300 nesting pairs in Long Beach-Pass Christian. While MCAS members were involved in the survey there appeared numbers of people, both resident and tourist, who expressed great interest in the area, and it soon became apparent that local citizens were regarding all Terns, nests, and colonies as a possession to be cared for, looked after, and bragged about. The tide had definitely turned.

As the season progressed, with no unusual high tides and very little rain, success was apparent. Although some controversy exists over the merits of marking nests, my own opinion, based on observation is that marked nests have the definite advantage of extra protection against human carelessness. Other human visitors used a variety of flotsam and jetsam to mark nests that we missed. As the season progressed, the beach became less appealing to the curious for the sun was mercilessly hot and the vegetation, which by then covered the area, included that vicious little sand burr, an effective deterrent to humans but an unfortunate tormentor of young Least Terns.

Late in June we pondered the future of the nesting areas, which were

a whimsical thing left only to the discretion of the supervisors, who at any time might proclaim that enough is enough and turn the nesting areas back to recreational areas. Since MCAS felt that we were riding the tide of enlightened and favorable public opinion, an announcement was made on WLOX TV, late in June as part of the nightly news broadcast. In an interview done on the beach, with the subjects of our concern delightfully visible, I made a plea for public support of our intention to ask the Board of Supervisors to designate both of these major colonies as permanent sanctuaries during the nesting season.

Two weeks later, a delegation of MCAS went before the Board of Supervisors, presenting our public commendation to Mr. Arlan Robinson for his original efforts and the resultant spectacular success during 1976. In his acceptance remarks he called upon other supervisors to join him in assigning a permanent designation to the nesting colonies, to which they unhesitatingly and surprisingly agreed. A resolution is currently being written to that effect and we do regard that the colonies have an official permanent status as of that meeting.

We understand that these colonies may represent some of the largest on the mainland. It is certainly unique that they lie only several feet south of the heavily travelled U.S. Highway 90. The South Mississippi Development District is preparing a booklet for distribution within the tourist industry, outlining the history of the nesting areas, and several articles are being written for possible inclusion in national publications.

We don't feel that the entire problem is solved. With the spread of publicity there is a natural increase of nature lovers and the idly curious who wish to see the breeding cycle of the Least Tern. We feel that with good sound advice from conservationists, we may continue to have a thriving colony and still allow limited access to the sanctuaries. In that regard we are considering the use of boardwalks from parking bay to tideline and will give consideration to any worthwhile suggestions as to how MCAS can effectively work with the Board of Supervisors.