Tina Tern

“A Life on a Rooftop Beach”

A Short Story
Followed by Fun and Instructive Games

Hi. My name is Tina Tern.
I am a Least Tern baby and I am about one week old. Can you guess where I live?

Photo: Doug Clark
I live on a roof! It is a strange place for a seabird like me to be raised. My parents would rather have chosen a beach for our home, like their ancestors did, but because there are so many houses, hotels and people on the beaches, there wasn’t a quiet spot for them to lay their eggs.

Instead, they chose this flat roof, scraped a little hole in the gravel, and laid two eggs. Three weeks later, my little brother and I hatched. Both my dad and my mom take turns feeding us. They catch little fish by diving into the water and bring them to us one at a time. Yummy!

Here you see my dad taking my mom out to dinner. In our bird family, it is not an engagement ring that is given to the bride-to-be, but a fish!

We, the Least Terns, are colonial birds. This means that we nest in big groups and the grown-up birds help each other. On the roof where I live, there are about ten Least Tern families, but I have heard of colonies with 100 or more families. My parents count on other grown-up terns to help chase away predators, like laughing gulls or crows, that would like to eat me!

We are called the Least Terns because we are the smallest Terns in North America. When I am full-grown I will be only about nine inches long.
This is my cousin Joe. He is three weeks old and has started to learn to fly. You can see his wing feathers have just grown in.

When I’m able to fly, my parents will take me to a nearby beach and teach me how to dive so I can catch small fish to eat.

Then, by September, we will all fly to South America where we will spend the winter. When I am two years old, I will be ready to start my own family here in Florida. I hope I’ll be able to find a safe place to raise my babies.

There are several ways you can help me and all Least Terns.

**Here is what you can do:**

➤ Give us plenty of room on the beach. If you get too close to our colony, we’ll fly up, leaving our eggs and babies exposed to the hot Florida sun; they can overheat within a few minutes.

➤ Biologists and other people who want to help us often put up a fence around our nests. If you are playing on the beach and see a roped off area, be sure to stay out of there. This is because our eggs and chicks are very hard to see and people might step on them.

➤ Walk around us when we rest on the beach: we need our quiet time too!

➤ Keep your dog on a leash and away from us. We birds perceive dogs as predators and we are highly disturbed by them.

➤ If we are nesting on a roof, tell people that we really need their help and that we will only stay there for about two months, usually from April to June.
Least Terns aren’t the only birds that nest on top of roofs. **Black Skimmers** and **American Oystercatchers** naturally nest on beaches, however, they will also sometimes raise their families on a rooftop.

Have you ever seen a skimmer? They are the only birds in the world that have a lower beak that is longer than their upper beak.

This odd beak is useful when Black Skimmers go fishing. Skimmers fly just above the water, with their lower beak slicing through the top inch or so of the water’s surface—when they feel a fish, they snap it up! It is cool to watch them feed at sunrise and sunset.

**Black Skimmers** are colonial and you can see large groups of them all year in our region. Remember: if you see skimmers or other birds resting on the beach, do not chase them—walk around them. When birds are disturbed and fly up, they waste precious energy.

**Oystercatchers** also sometimes nest on roofs. They are very territorial—that means they do not like other Oystercatcher families to set up homes near their nest.

Many people have trouble telling Black Skimmers and Oystercatchers apart because they are both black and white birds with red bills. But if you look carefully, you will see that Oystercatchers are shaped more like sandpipers, and skimmers more like gulls and terns.

Oystercatchers stand taller and they use their long, strong bills to open—you guessed it—oyster shells! That’s a tough job!
So you see, the beaches where you play and swim are also our homes. Now discover more bird species that nest on our beaches:

**Snowy Plovers** are one of the hardest birds to spot on the beach. Beige and white, they blend perfectly among the debris scattered on the white sand. They live where the softest, whitest sand piles up into dunes.

Snowy Plovers make a nearly invisible “nest scrape” hollow in the sand and they lay two or three spotted, perfectly camouflaged eggs. When the chicks hatch, they are so tiny they can hide by crouching behind a sea shell. Plovers eat tiny flies that live on the sand or mud flats. Snowy Plovers are among the rarest birds in Florida, with only about 50 family pairs in the whole state—all on the Gulf Coast.

**Laughing Gulls** are graceful, sleek gray-backed birds whose heads turn black in spring as a signal that they are ready to mate and raise young. They nest on beaches in large numbers, in the dunes where they weave their cup-like nests out of beach grasses.

Laughing Gulls eat fish and a variety of other foods. You might have heard them call—it sounds like they are laughing “kah-wi, kah-wi, kah-wi!”

**Royal Terns** look like sports-model gulls, much larger than Least Terns, with handsome gray and white bodies and orange beaks. Strictly fish-eaters, they plunge into the water to catch small fish which they carry back to the shoreline, one fish at a time, to feed their chicks. Royal Tern parents lay only one egg each spring and feed their single chick until the following winter, while it learns the tricks of diving for its own fish dinner.
Now meet three species of birds which you will often see on our beaches. These birds do not nest here, but use the beach to rest and feed during their migration, or during the winter months.

**Black-bellied Plovers** visit Florida during migration to and from nesting sites on the far-north Arctic tundra. Some Black-bellied Plovers spend the winter in Florida; others travel as far as southern South America. They eat red worms and other invertebrates, running across mud or grass flats to catch their prey, and sometimes listen, robin-like, for sounds of tiny animals moving under the mud.

**Ruddy Turnstones** are stout, brightly colored sandpipers with orange legs. They putter along shorelines, turning over seaweed or shells as they look for tiny beach animals to eat, like sea roaches, beach fleas, and sand beetles.

**Sanderlings** nest high on the Arctic Circle in summer but they travel south for the winter. Some stay here in Florida while others travel on to coastlines in South America. Colored a pale sand-white shade in winter and a warm orange-brown in summer, these active little sandpipers chase the waves up and down the shore, snatching small beach animals, sand fleas, and even horseshoe crab eggs.
Least Tern Coloring Page

B - Black
G - Gray
R - Red
W - White

Blue Water
Black Skimmer Coloring Page

B—Black
G—Gray
R—Red
W—White
DRAW LINE FROM BIRD TO ITS FOOD!

A  Black Skimmer

B  Oystercatcher

C  Snowy Plover

D  Black Bellied Plover

E  Ruddy Turnstone

1  Red worms

2  Searoach

3  Oyster

4  Silverside Fish

5  Shorefly

(Answers on page 17)
Can you answer the questions about Least Terns using the information from the Least Tern facts sheet on the next page?

1. Least Terns have a wingspan of ______________________ inches.

2. The scientific name for the Least Tern is ________________________________.

3. Least Terns feed almost exclusively on ________________________________.

4. A similar species to the Least Tern is the ________________________________.

5. Three predators of Least Terns are: a) ________________________________

   b) ________________________________ and c) ________________________________.

6. What is one way to describe the sound a Least Tern makes: ____________________.

7. List three problems that Least Terns face in Florida: a) ____________________

   b) ________________________________ c) ________________________________.

8. The Least Tern flies with ________________________________ beats.

9. One place you can observe Least Terns in the Tampa Bay area is ____________________.

10. The tail of the Least Tern is ________________________________.

11. The head of the Least Tern looks like it has a ______________________ with a white forehead.

12. Clutch size means the number of eggs in a nest. The clutch size for the Least Tern is ______.

13. A tool that is useful to observe Least Terns is ________________________________.

14. A baby Least Tern chick hatched on a rooftop nest must be careful not to ________________.

15. One of the characteristics of birds is their bodies are covered with ____________________.

16. What do you think is the biggest problem for Least Terns? ____________________

   ________________________________

17. Why? ________________________________

   ________________________________

18. How can you help the Least Terns? ________________________________

   ________________________________
LEAST TERN (Sterna antillarum)

**Physical Structure**
- 8.5 – 9.5 inches
- Wingspan – 20 inches
- Bill – yellow-orange with black tip
- Short legs
- Forked tail
- Rounded head
- Legs & feet are orange yellow
- Sexes are alike but female is slightly smaller
- Juvenile has different plumage
- Smallest Tern in North America

**Classification**
- Kingdom – Animalia
- Phylum – Chordata
- Sub-Phylum – Vertebrata
- Class – Aves
- Order – Charadriiformes
- Family – Laridae
- Genus – Sterna
- Species – antillarum

**Common Name** – Least Tern

**Problems**
- Loss of beach nesting habitat
- People using nesting habitat
- Dogs on the beach
- Predators on beaches
- Loss of flat gravel rooftop nesting areas because owner changes to new plastic rooftop coverings
- Chicks falling off roof
- Stormy weather causing nest flooding

**Population Status**
The Least Tern is listed as a Threatened species in Florida by the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FFWCC)

**Food**
- Opportunistic feeder
- Diet almost exclusively small fish but sometimes small aquatic invertebrates

**Flight Behavior**
- Flies with rapid wing beats
- Hovers
- Dives in water for fish swimming near the surface
- Dives from high above the water
- Shakes off water on the body after dive

**Number of Broods**
- 1 per year
- Will renest if early nesting attempt fails
- Clutch size – 2 to 3 eggs
- Incubation – 20 to 22 days

**Chicks**
- Active 24-36 hours after hatching
- Cryptic / camouflage coloration
- Fed fish by both parents
- Fledge at 19-20 days
- Juvenile plumage first year

**Predators**
- Night Herons
- Crows
- Gulls
- Hawks and Owls
- Raccoons
- Housecats
- Dogs

**Feathers**
- Back is pale gray
- Belly is white
- Head has black cap with white forehead
- Black nape
- Black eye streak from crown to bill

**Juvenile**
- Pinkish brown underparts
- Dark shoulder bar on wings
- Back feathers faintly barred

**Migration**
- Migrate north to the U.S. along Atlantic Coast between Florida and Maine in the early spring
- Least Terns are also found on Pacific Coast, in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, along the Mississippi River and on the Gulf Coast
- Found in Florida – April through September
- Breeds in Florida
- Begins southern migration in September
- Winter range not well known, but some winter off northern coast of South America from Venezuela to northeastern Brazil

**Resources**
- Bird field guidebooks
- Cornell Lab. of Ornithology
- FFWCC
- Web Sites

**Bird Observation**
- Lots of opportunity during the summer months along the coastline
- Ft. DeSoto Park in St. Pete
- Freshwater lakes, canals and retention ponds near rooftop nesting areas
- Binoculars
- Visits to the beach (April – Sept.)

**Contact Barb Zias at St. Petersburg Audubon for more information on how to get involved  727-521-4997**

**Similar Species**
- Black Terns – fly like a swallow and have darker feathers
- Larger Tern species – Larger size and fly with slower wing beats

**Sound**
- Voice – sharp repeated “kit”
- Harsh squeaking
- “Zree eek zeek” or a rapid “kitti kitti kitti”

**Population Status**
- Black Terns – fly like a swallow and have darker feathers
- Larger Tern species – Larger size and fly with slower wing beats

**Nests**
- Prefers sand, pebble, gravel or shell substrate
- Colonial nesters
- April – August
- Nests on beaches with little vegetation
- Also nests on river sandbars and flat gravel rooftops
- Nests are shallow scrapes in sand
- Cryptic / camouflage egg coloration
- Both parents take turns incubating eggs

**Chicks**
- Active 24-36 hours after hatching
- Cryptic / camouflage coloration
- Fed fish by both parents
- Fledge at 19-20 days
- Juvenile plumage first year

**Resources**
- Bird field guidebooks
- Cornell Lab. of Ornithology
- FFWCC
- Web Sites

**Field Trips / Lectures**
- Check with your local Audubon Chapter for program of Field Trips and Lectures
Writing prompts:

**Narrative:** Pretend you are a Least Tern arriving in the Tampa Bay area in April looking for a nesting spot. Describe what kind of nesting habitat you would be looking for, and what you would do to raise your family.

**Expository:** Explain why it is a good idea for Least Terns to be colonial nesters. A colonial nesting bird is one who nests in a colony with other Least Terns, whose nests are only 2 to 3 feet away.

**Expository:** Explain why you think the Least Tern is a Threatened Species.

Reading:

**Recognize the difference between fact and opinion:**

Least Terns are beautiful birds. They migrate to Florida in the spring of the year. They nest and raise their young while they are in Florida. They nest on beaches with little vegetation or on flat gravel rooftops if they cannot find enough natural areas to nest. They share their nesting areas with other nesting birds.

Write one fact from the sentences above. Then write one opinion from the sentences above.

Math:

You are observing a Least Tern nest with two chicks, baby chick A and baby chick B. Both mother bird and father bird are feeding the young. Mother bird brings a fish to baby chick A. Father bird brings a fish to baby chick A. Mother bird brings a fish to baby chick B. Father bird brings a fish to baby bird A. Mother bird flies in without a fish at the same time father bird brings a fish to baby chick B. How many fish did each chick get. Can you graph the results?

Create a food chain for the Least Tern:

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sun → [ ] → [ ] → [ ]
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Least Terns and Laughing Gulls are both considered to be Shorebirds. They are very similar in many ways, but they are also very different in many ways. Use your knowledge about Least Terns and Laughing Gulls to fill in the Venn diagram above. List the ways the 2 birds are different in each circle labeled with their names. Where the circles overlap, list the ways they are the same. Think about their sizes, habitats, food, predators, whether they migrate, nesting habits and other behaviors.

Note: The laughing gull is the common black headed gull you see in parking lots and at the beach. It is called a Laughing gull because it sounds like it is laughing.
Draw a line between the bird, its name, and the sentence describing it:

1. Least tern
2. Black skimmer
3. Black-bellied plover
4. Laughing gull
5. Oystercatcher

I am a ____-____. I visit Florida during migration and in the winter.

I am a ____-____. I am in Florida only in the spring and summer to nest. I fly to South America for the winter.

I am a ____-____. My head turns black in the spring. I nest in the dunes where I weave a cup-like nest.

I am an ____________. I am territorial. I have a long, strong bill to open oysters.

I am a ____-____. I feed by flying just above the water, slicing it with my longer lower beak; when I feel a fish, I snap it up!

(Answers on page 17)
True or False!

1. Tina Tern lives on a roof.  
   True __  False __

2. When Tina is about 2 years old, she will be ready to start her own family.  
   True __  False __

3. The Laughing Gulls are predators to the Least Tern.  
   True __  False __

4. Tina’s father brings her mommy lots of insects to eat.  
   True __  False __

5. Tina and her family will fly to the Bahamas for the winter months.  
   True __  False __

6. The Least Terns ask you to stay clear of their colonies while they are nesting.  
   True__  False __

7. Black Skimmers like to fly high above the water when they look for fish.  
   True__  False __

8. Royal Terns are much larger than the Least Terns.  
   True __  False __

9. Snowy Plovers are very easy to find on the beach.  
   True __  False __

    True __  False __

(Answers on page 17)
Tina's dad is bringing back a fish for her dinner and is calling her. Help Tina find him through the maze.
Beach Nesting Birds/ Hidden words

ADULT
CAMOUFLAGE
COLONIES
FISH
JUVENILE
OYSTERCATCHER
ROOFTOPS
TERN
WILLET

BEACHFRONT
CHICK
CONSERVATION
GULL
MIGRATE
PLOVER
SAND
VEGETATION

BIRD
COAST
EGGS
HABITAT
NEST
PREDATOR
SKIMMER
WATER

Answers to the games:
Page 9 Bird/Food: A-4; B-3; C-5; D-1; E-2.
Page 14 Bird/Name/Sentence: 1-b-V; 2-a-II; 3-e-IV; 4-c-I; 5-d-III.
Page 17 True or False: 1-T; 2-T; 3-T; 4-F; 5-F; 6-T; 7-F; 8-T; 9-F; 10-T.
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Help us protect Least Terns and other Beach Nesting Birds!

Clearwater Audubon Society and St. Petersburg Audubon Society have a county-wide project monitoring and protecting Beach Nesting Birds.

To volunteer or to get more information, contact:

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