

# 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!



Photo: Barb Collins

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.

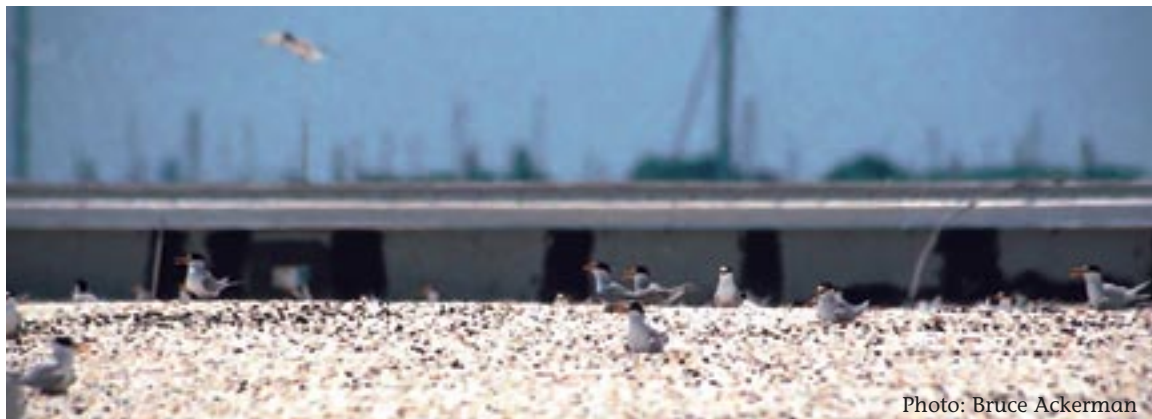


Photo: Bruce Ackerman

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.



Photo: Doug Clark



Photo: Doug Clark

### **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.



Photo: Doug Clark



Photo: David Kandz

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.

4 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.



Photo: Lee Snyder



Photo: Rich Paul

**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.



Photo: James Hancock

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.



Photo: Lee Snyder

**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.



Photo: Lee Snyder

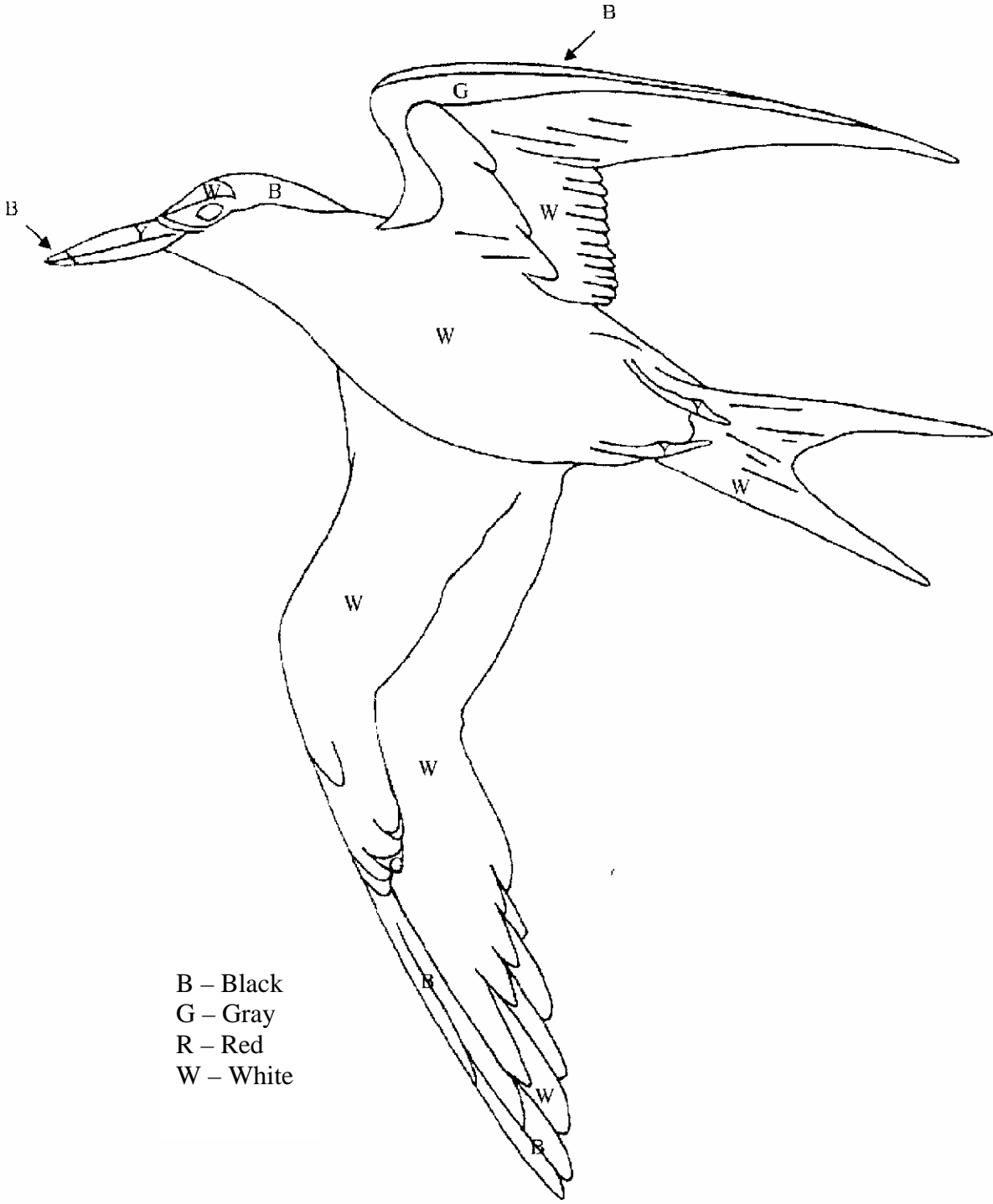
**Sanderlings** nest high on the Arctic Circle in summer but they travel south for the winter. Some stay here in Florida while others



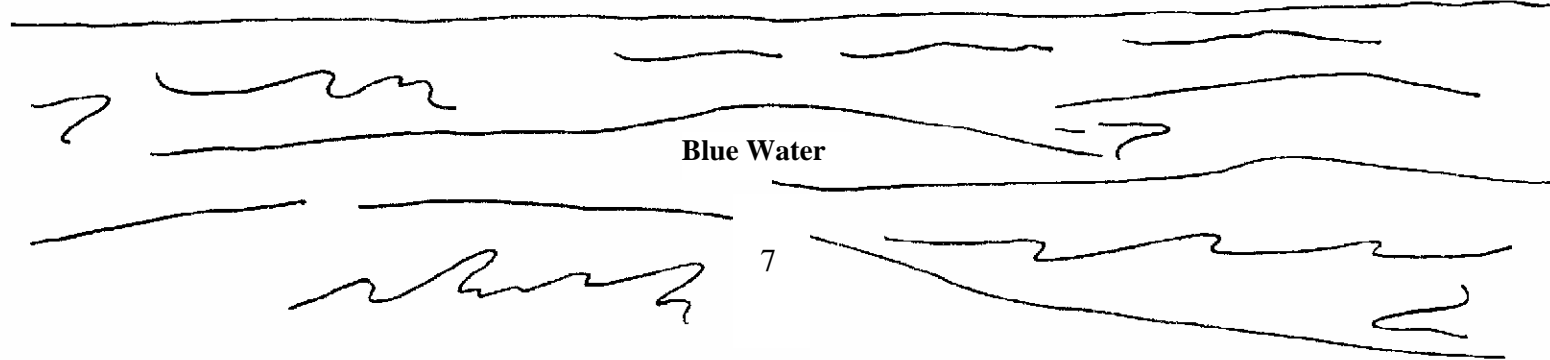
Photo: Lee Snyder

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

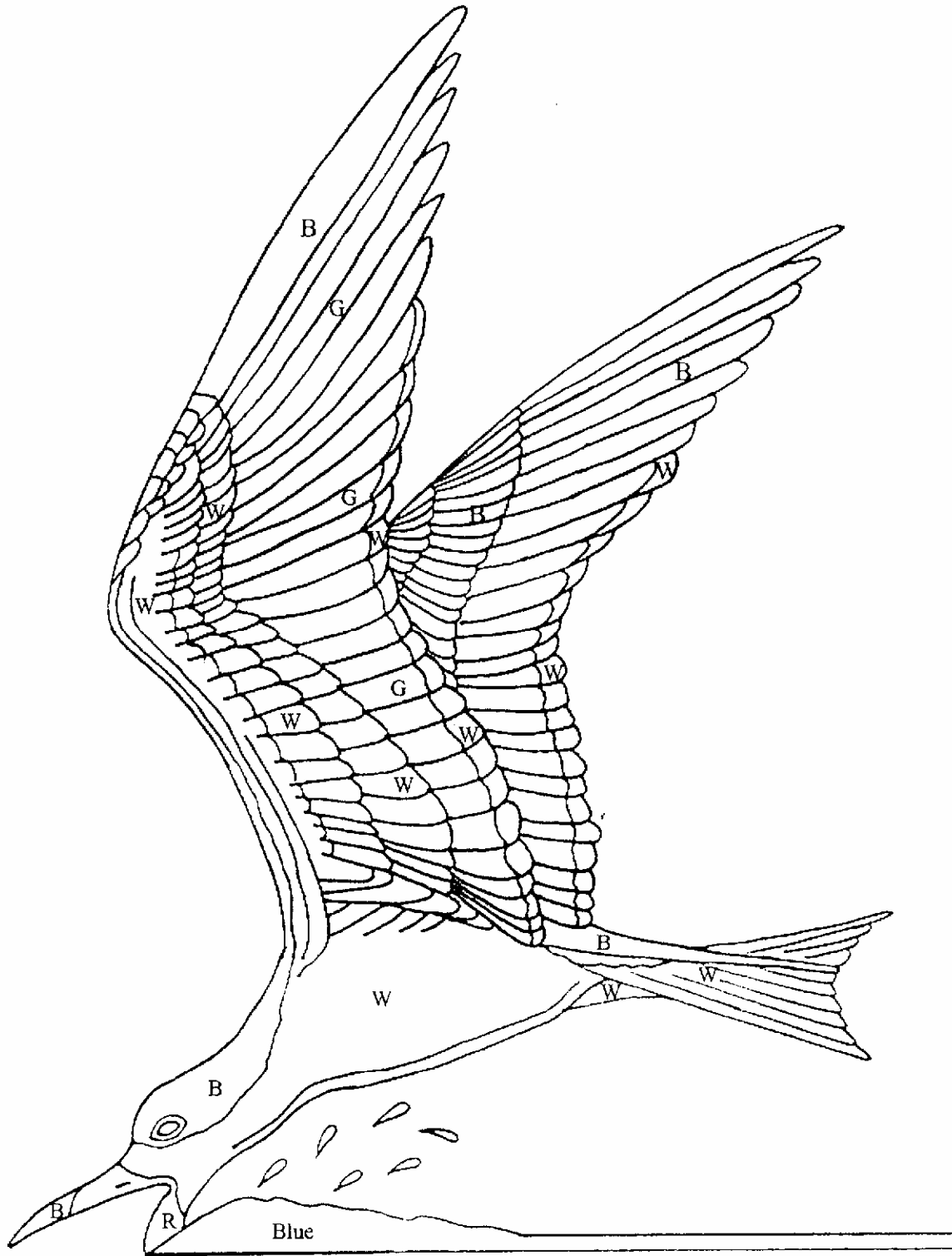


B - Black  
G - Gray  
R - Red  
W - White



Blue Water

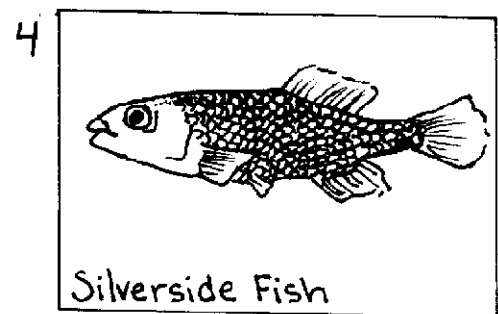
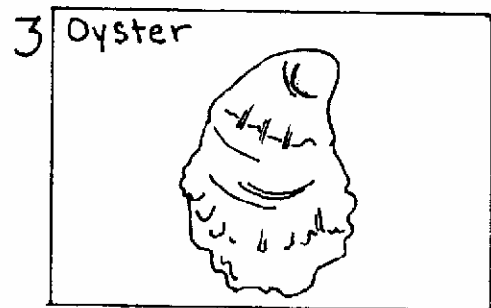
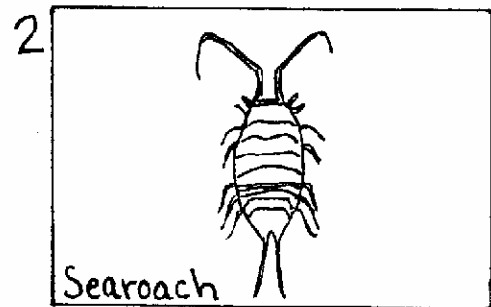
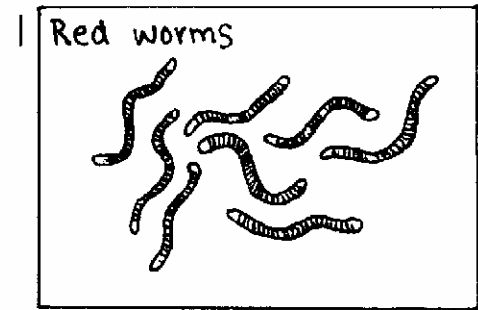
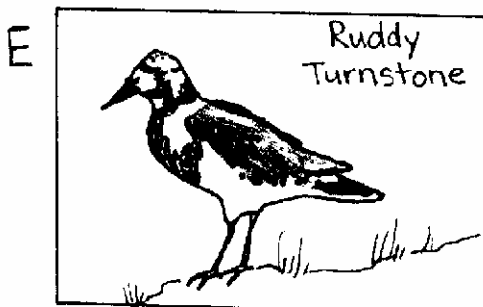
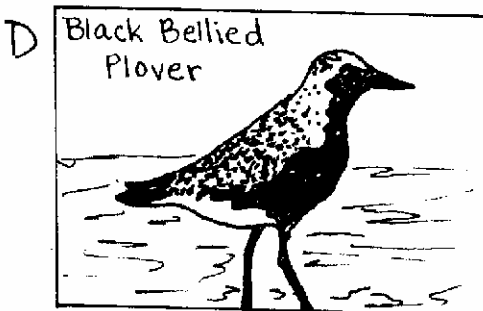
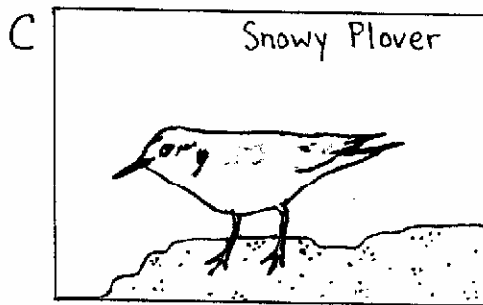
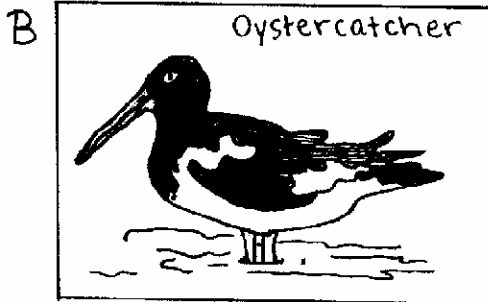
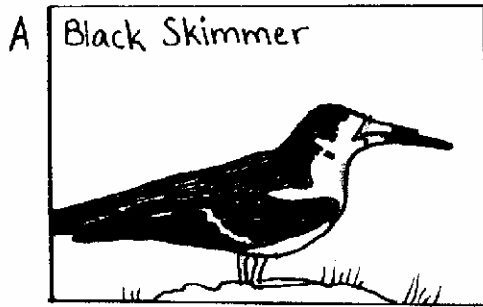
# Black Skimmer Coloring Page



B—Black  
G—Gray  
R—Red  
W—White



# DRAW LINE FROM BIRD TO ITS FOOD!



Sarah Burris

(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

### Predators

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

### Population Status

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

### Similar Species

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

### Food

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

### 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



Photo Doug Clark

### Sound

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

### 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

### What you can do

- Respect nesting areas
- Do not approach nesting colonies
- Keep pets on a leash
- Keep housecats inside
- Do not leave food on the beach to attract raccoons
- Help survey nesting terns

### 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

### 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

### 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

### 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:

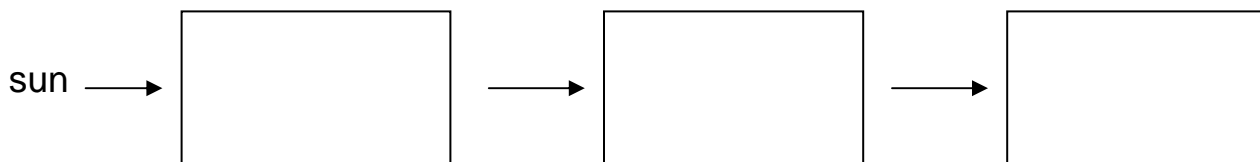
Least Terns are beautiful birds. They migrate to Florida in the spring of the year. They nest and raise their young while they are in Florida. They nest on beaches with little vegetation or on flat gravel rooftops if they cannot find enough natural areas to nest. They share their nesting areas with other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

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

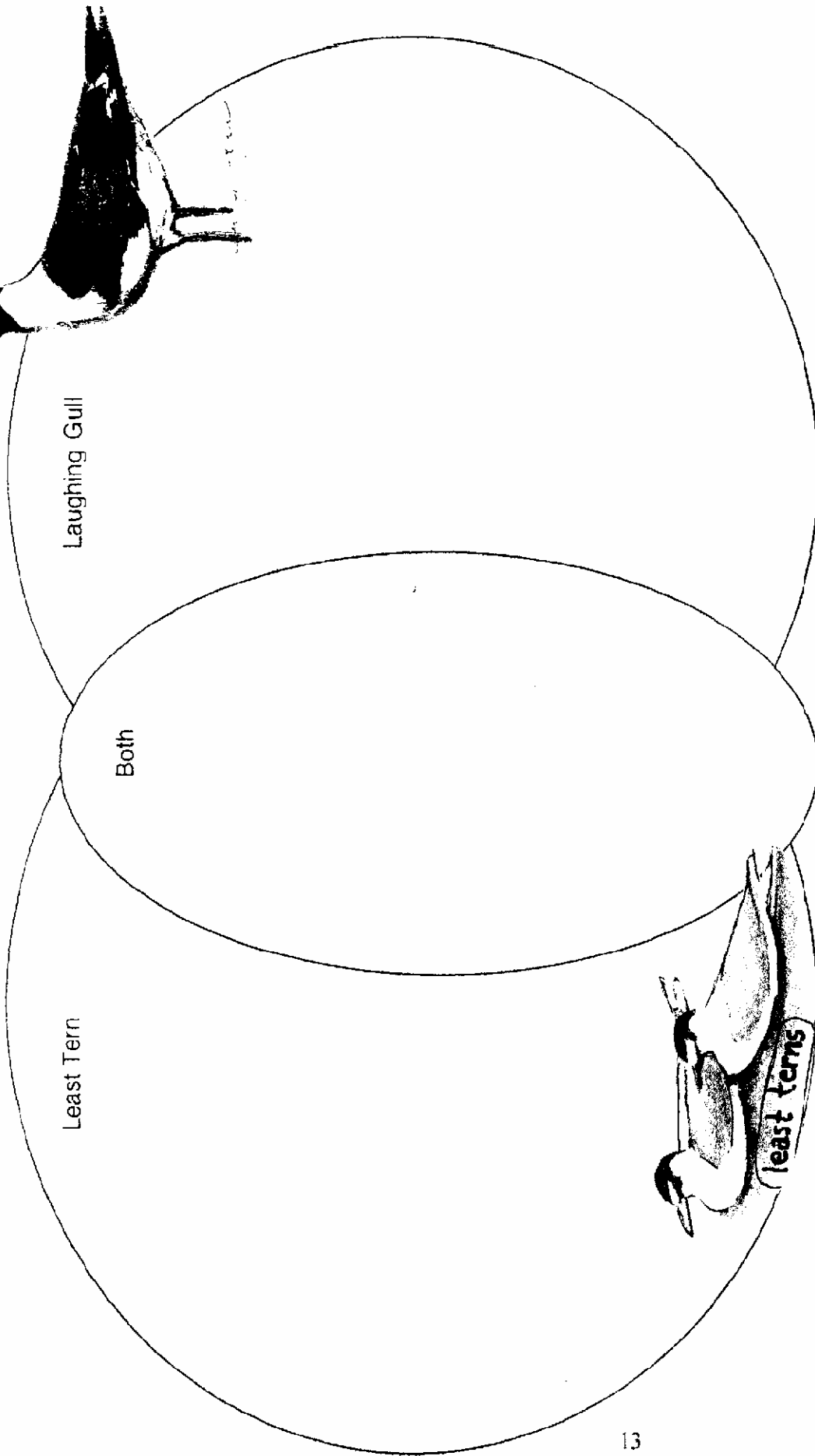
## Math:

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:



Compare Least Terns and Laughing Gulls with a Venn Diagram



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:



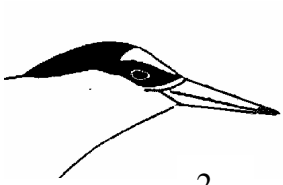
1

least  
tern

a

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

I



2

black  
skimmer

b

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

II



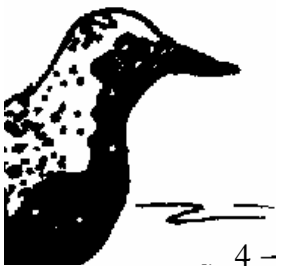
3

black-bellied  
plover

c

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

III



4 -

laughing  
gull

d

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

IV

oystercatcher

e

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!

V



5

(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 \_\_\_
10. Black-bellied Plovers migrate from the Arctic tundra. True \_\_\_ False \_\_\_

(Answers on page 17)





## Beach Nesting Birds/ Hidden words

W J T C P W R Y X N A S R I R  
 J U A N H M E G Z D A E N D O  
 F V T F E I H O U N V O X O T  
 N E I A R S C L D O I C D K A  
 Q N B E J R T K L T F A I A D  
 Q I A Q T H A P A X U M W E E  
 S L H I N A C V T S A O C W R  
 B E A C H F R O N T C U L A P  
 N V I I E E E G B Z J F L T W  
 B R B N S A T I I W I L L E T  
 I Y E N O Z S Z K M D A U R S  
 R M O T N L Y F I S H G G G X  
 D C L I W N O I T A T E G E V  
 R E M M I K S C O T T E X X P  
 V U V R O O F T O P S I N O N

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.



This booklet was conceived and designed by the **St. Petersburg Audubon Society**.

Printing was made possible by a grant from the **Tampa Bay Estuary Program**. We thank **Nanette Holland**, Public Outreach Coordinator, for her encouragement and support.

The text and the games were developed in collaboration by:

**Monique Abrams**, St. Petersburg Audubon Society.

**Gloria Bliss**, Tampa Audubon Society/Learning Gate School, Tampa.

**Carol Imbriani**, St. Petersburg Audubon Society.

**Jenny Novak**, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

**Ann Paul**, Tampa Bay Regional Coordinator, Audubon of Florida.

**Francia Smith**, Environmental Education Resource Teacher, Pinellas County.

**Barbara Zias**, St. Petersburg Audubon Society.

Lessons plans were developed by **Wanda Kirby**, teacher at Westgate Elementary.

We thank the following people who donated the use of their photographs:

**Bruce Ackerman**

**Barbara Collins**

**Dave Kandz**

**Lee Snyder**

**Doug Clark**

**James Hancock**

**Rich Paul**

We thank **Katherine Ackerman**, **Sarah Burris** and **Carol Brooks** for their illustrations, **Christina Evans** for formatting the story, **Dave Kandz**, St. Petersburg Audubon Society, for scanning in the photographs. We thank **Bruce Ackerman**, St. Petersburg Audubon Society, **Beth Forys**, professor at Eckerd College, **Jeanne Murphy**, St. Petersburg Audubon Society, and **Cindy Steele**, teacher at Woodlawn Elementary, for their review and corrections.

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:

St. Petersburg Audubon Society

P.O. Box 49087

St. Petersburg, FL 33743

727-521-4997

[www.stpeteaudubon.org](http://www.stpeteaudubon.org)

Clearwater Audubon Society

P.O. Box 97

Clearwater, FL 33757

727-517-2423

[www.clearwateraudubon.org](http://www.clearwateraudubon.org)