

## LEAST TERN

*Sternula antillarum*

non-breeding visitor, occasional; rare breeding visitor

monotypic

The Least Tern breeds across the s. United States S through Mexico and the Caribbean, and winters in C-S America (AOU 1998). This species and the closely related [Little Tern](#) are difficult to distinguish, which has led to uncertainty about the status of each species in the Hawaiian Islands (Clapp 1989; see [Little Tern](#)). Least Tern appears to be more common than Little Tern, with substantiated records from Midway to Hawaii I, at least one confirmed breeding attempt on Midway, and evidence for successful reproductive efforts on O'ahu and possibly French Frigate Shoals, but the occurrence of Least on Midway suggest that both species may be capable of occurring anywhere in the islands, and thus most records of *Sternula* terns in Hawaii could be of either species. As with Little Tern, the majority of records involve adults and one-year old birds in May-Aug, and several records of first-fall birds in Aug-Oct perhaps reflect local reproduction. Least and Little terns were split at the genus level from *Sterna* by the AOU (2006).

In the *Northwestern Hawaiian Islands*, well-documented Least Terns have been recorded from *Midway* 5-10 May 1989, 13-14 Sep 1990 (2 individuals), 5-22 Jul 1993 (pair), 15 Jun-Sep 1999 (3 adults involved in an unsuccessful breeding attempt; Pyle et al. 2001, *NAB* 53:436; [HRBP](#) 1234-1236, 1289-1292 published *NAB* 55:5-6), and 8 (along with 2 Little Terns) 8-10 Sep 2002 (Rowlett 2002). On *Laysan* a Least Tern was photographed 28-29 Aug 1989 ([HRBP](#) 0857). At *French Frigate* a juvenile found dead 9 Aug 1991 (BPBM 178466, [HRBP](#) 5116; *NAB* 51:1057) suggests breeding there that year, 2 adults and a 1-year old bird were photographed in Jul 2004 ([HRBP](#) 5161-5162), and a basic-plumaged adult was found dead on the runway 15 Sep 2005 (BPBM 184968). Other unidentified small terns recorded from Kure, Midway (especially during 1991-1998), Laysan, and French Frigate (see [Little Tern](#)) may have included Least Terns.

A [minimum](#) of 86 small terns have been recorded in the *Southeastern Hawaiian Islands* (see Clapp 1989 for a partial summary), of which 28 involve substantiated Least Terns (e.g., [HRBP](#) 1226-1227, 5740-5743) and none involve confirmed Little Terns. The majority of individuals have been recorded on *O'ahu*, beginning with one (unidentified to species) at the Nu'upia Ponds, Mokapu Peninsula 24 May-26 Dec 1953 (*E* 14:12, 52) and including records for a [minimum](#) of 64 individuals (including 22 confirmed as Least Terns) during at least half of all subsequent years through 2009 (e.g., [HRBP](#) 1226-1227, 5740-5743). Multiple individuals together have been recorded during nine years, with a high count of 6 at Waipi'o 12 Sep 1976 (*E* 38:4); observations of adults with chicks or juveniles in 1976 (Waipi'o), 1980 (Ki'i unit of JCNWR), 2002 (Pouhala Marsh), and 2009 (Ki'i Unit of JCNWR) suggest breeding on O'ahu those years but these also potentially could have involved dispersal of parents with juveniles from other islands. The only other Southeastern Islands with records of Least Tern are *Maui* (12 individuals including 2 confirmed Least Terns, 1966-2008; e.g., *E* 27:24, 32) and *Hawai'i* (10 including 4 confirmed Least Terns, 1982-2009; e.g., *E* 45:75, 48:113; [HRBP](#) 1047-1048). The earliest spring arrival was recorded on 14 Mar (2000, Wahiawa unit of PHNWR, O'ahu) and the latest fall birds were individuals that lingered to be recorded on Christmas Counts 26 Dec 1953 (O'ahu; *E* 14:56), 23 Dec 1978 (Maui; *E* 39:90), and 19 Jan 2005 (Waipi'o, O'ahu); another report

from January (*E* 46:135) is unsubstantiated. The date range for confirmed Least Terns is 26 Mar (2005, Wahiawa) to 14 Nov (2009, Ki'i).

Five subspecies of Least Tern have been identified but are weakly defined and in need of revision (Patten and Erickson 1996); we follow Pyle (2008) in considering this long-distance migrant species monotypic. In any case, neither the juvenile specimen (BPBM) nor any of the photographed individuals can be diagnosed to previously recognized subspecies, but the most likely to occur in Hawaii would be "*S.a. browni*" which breeds in California and Baja California, and "*mexicana*" which breeds along the Pacific coast of Mexico from Sonora to Jalisco.

#### [Acronyms and Abbreviations](#)

#### [Literature cited](#)

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