

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 it 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, confirmed breeding attempts at both of these locations, and evidence for successful reproductive efforts as well on O'ahu and possibly French Frigate Shoals. As with Little Tern, the majority of records involve adults and one-year old birds in May-Aug, and several records of juvenile and first-fall birds in Aug-Oct reflect the likelihood of 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 *Kure* 6-8 Aug 2016 ([HRBP](#) 6662-6663); *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), 8 (along with 2 Little Terns) 8-10 Sep 2002 (Rowlett 2002), 2 on 22 Jun 2015 ([HRBP](#) 6658), and at least 2 (among 12 *Sternula* terns) 22 Oct 2016 ([HRBP](#) 6664). On *Laysan* one was photographed 28-29 Aug 1989 ([HRBP](#) 0857) and on *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), a basic-plumaged adult was found dead on the runway 15 Sep 2005 (BPBM 184968), and two were observed 31 Jul-31 Aug 2010, one of which was found dead (Howard et al. 2013; [HRBP](#) 6657; BPBM 185545). Other unidentified *Sternula* terns recorded from Kure, Midway, Laysan, and French Frigate (see [Little Tern](#)) may have included Least Terns.

A [minimum](#) of 116 *Sternula* terns have been recorded in the *Southeastern Hawaiian Islands* (see Clapp 1989 for a partial summary), of which about 50 involve substantiated Least Terns and none have involved confirmed Little Terns. Repeated occurrences of adults between years at the same locations indicate that birds return in successive summers after wintering elsewhere. 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 72 individuals (including 29 confirmed as Least Terns) during at least half of all subsequent years through 2016 (e.g., [HRBP](#) 1226-1227, 5740-5743). Multiple individuals together have been recorded during 15 years, with a high count of 6 at Waipi'o 12 Sep 1976 (*E* 38:4); observations of adults with 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 or dispersal of parents with juveniles from other Hawaiian Islands. The only records from Moloka'i involve a Least/Little Tern observed at Pu'uhalala 22 Aug 2009 and two at Koheo Wetlands 3 Oct 2012. On *Mau*i a minimum of 15 *Sternula* terns including 4 confirmed Least Terns have been observed in 1966-2016 (e.g., *E* 27:24, 32) and on *Hawai'i I* a minimum of 25 including 18 confirmed Least Terns have been

observed in 1982-2016 (e.g., *E* 45:75, 48:113; [HRBP](#) 1047-1048, 6655-6656, 6661), including one sitting on a floating coconut at sea 15 km off Kona 19 Jul 2010 ([HRBP](#) 6655-6656). During 2010-2016 at least 5 confirmed Least Terns, up to 7 at once, and up to 8-10 per year based on age determinations, were observed along the N Kona Coast between Kapo'ikai (Makalawena) Wetlands and Kona (Kealakehe) WTP each summer (e.g., [HRBP](#) 6661), with adults observed carrying fish and up to four juveniles observed per year. In 2012-2016, up to three nesting pairs were discovered and monitored, one at the Kealakehe Wastewater Treatment Pond and two at Kapo'ikai Pond (Szczyz et al. 2014, Baird et al. 2016). DNA evidence collected from eggs in 2014 confirmed field-based identifications that the parents were Least Terns. Additional studies on these nesting Least Terns have been undertaken, including the application of geolocators and sampling of feathers for stable isotopic analyses, to try and ascertain where these birds go for winter (Szczyz et al. 2014, Baird et al. 2016).

The earliest spring arrival for Least Tern in the Hawaiian Islands was of one recorded on 1 Mar (first-cycle Least/Little Tern, 2016, Kealia Pond NWR, Maui; [HRBP](#) 6659-6660) 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, possibly over-wintering); another report from January (*E* 46:135) is unsubstantiated. The date range for confirmed Least Terns is 26 Mar (2005, Wahiawa) to 11 Dec (2016, Kona WTP). Curiously, there are no confirmed records of *Sternula* terns from Kaua'i., as well as from Ni'ihau, Lana'i, or Kaho'olawi

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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