

# Least Terns nesting on rooftops

In Florida, Least Terns traditionally nested on sandy beaches of barrier islands and along isolated stretches of the mainland shore. However, due to the increasing number of people, pets, and vehicles on our beaches, Least Terns adapted to nest on gravel rooftops as an alternative. As of 2021, around 46% of Florida's Least Terns reside on rooftops when nesting. Though there are fewer disturbances on the rooftops than busy beaches, there are still many risks involved with rooftop nesting.

Least Terns nest in loose groups or colonies, which can range in size from a few pairs to several hundred birds. Pairs construct nests by making a shallow depression, or scrape, into the loose sand or gravel. The female then lays one to three eggs. Once hatched, a large colony on a roof can have many hungry mouths to feed. Adults will work diligently to provide enough food for their chicks, and it can get pretty busy and noisy around the building as a result. In addition, where there are birds, there are usually droppings.

Three or four days after hatching, the chicks leave the nest and are fairly mobile, which can be a problem if roofs lack a lip or barrier along their edge. Chicks can fall off the roof or get washed down the gutters. They face numerous



Adult Least Tern and nestling.  
Photo: Jeff Liechty

hazards on the ground (e.g. cats, dogs, ants, vehicles, foot traffic), and need to be returned to the roof as soon as possible. If you find a chick on the ground, please notify the managers or staff of the building and the rooftop biologist immediately. Chicks must be returned to the roof carefully, since the colony is very sensitive to disturbance.

Despite these dangers, Least Terns have been able to adapt to the many changes we have made to our coastal landscapes. They still need our help, and building owners working with the Florida Shorebird Alliance to protect important rooftop colonies are integral to their conservation in Florida.