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Today is Thursday, July 27, 2006
Originally published Thursday, July 20, 2006
Updated Thursday, July 20, 2006

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Predators once challenged their future

Now a Venice Beach colony has taken a tern for the better.
By Lee Peterson
Daily Breeze

Least terns glide into the wind that sweeps over the sand dunes, anchovies hanging from their bills, spotting their tiny chicks and then swooping down to make a fresh-fish delivery.

The newly hatched youngsters, 1½-inch-long balls of white fur with brown spots, have about three to four weeks of feeding time and sleeping before they are fully grown and on their own.

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After two previous breeding seasons of seeing every single egg eaten by predators, the California least tern colony at the beach near Marina del Rey is flourishing this year, thanks apparently to a new perimeter fence erected in March.

Biologists say the fence, built by the Department of Fish and Game, has given the endangered California least terns a chance to congregate in large enough numbers to stave off predators not stopped by the fence, namely crows.

The last two years, the crows didn't even wait for the chicks to hatch.

"Crows got them at the egg stage, so the (adult) terns just gave up and moved to other sites," said Lyann Comrack, associate wildlife biologist with Fish and Game.

As of this week, there were 372 nesting pairs that have produced 260 chicks at the site at the southern end of Venice Beach, according to Thomas Ryan, a biologist for Foothill Associates, a consulting firm helping Fish and Game with the project.

"They've been successful this year," Ryan said. "I'm very happy with the size of the colony."

The new fence didn't simply replace the old one, but was built around a larger

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area. The migratory shorebirds' territory grew from 4 acres to 7 acres, providing a wide buffer zone around the dunes where the white-bodied, black-headed terns nest amid the dune evening primrose.

There's safety in numbers for the terns.

When enough of the terns get together, the 9-inch-long birds with 20-inch wingspans can fend off the much larger crows or more aggressive starlings that like to eat tern eggs and chicks.

"It's really important to nest in a big group," Ryan said. That way, when a crow enters the area, 10 to 15 adult terns will respond, divebombing, hitting and pooping on the interloper. (They'll do that to human intruders as well, by the way.)

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