

When the beach was off-limits to humans, a rare colony of seabirds found a place to nest

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When the humans left, the seabirds flocked home.

A rare [colony](#) of least terns, a threatened, federally protected seabird, landed on Deerfield Beach in March, when humans did not have access to the sand. This is the first southeast Florida nesting colony in decades and will probably be the last for years to come.

The least tern form colonies on empty beaches, which in populated Broward County is a rare find.

"We have pushed them off," said Ann Wiley, who since late April has been guarding the colony. "We have crowded them out. And as soon as we backed off, they returned."

Wiley, a volunteer with the Florida Shorebird Alliance, became the lead organizer to protect the colony after it was discovered by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Even from the sidewalk during lockdown, Wiley said she felt like she was watching them in their [natural habitat](#), at the kind of beaches you'd find on the secluded islands off the west coast of Florida.

The least tern population has decreased by 88% over the last 40 years. That is due to the commercialization of beaches much like Deerfield, where the dune vegetation used for shade has been ripped out.

Least terns are fishermen, and this colony was probably attracted to the

bait fish off Deerfield Beach's pier. They're also the smallest of their kind, their chicks the size of cotton balls when they hatch.

At any one time, about 50 [birds](#) are nesting. Wiley believes the colony will stay in Deerfield until late July or early August before all the birds have migrated to South America.

For almost two months, the birds had the beach to themselves.

When the beaches reopened in late May and the normal crowds returned, Wiley formed a team of volunteers to patrol the colony every day from 6 a.m. to midnight. Wiley is there herself almost every day—the lifeguards know her as "the bird lady."

Wiley marked off the colony with pink flagging tape and placed wooden pallets to protect the terns from the sun.

There are more than 20 volunteers, many of them members of local Audubon societies. Nancy Freeman travels all the way from Jupiter.

Freeman points out a flock of them returning from the shore to feed their young, looking like small paper airplanes in the sky. Their chicks, light brown like the sand, wait for them under the limestone rock.

"I've never seen them like this," Freeman said. "To be able to watch their behavior and how they interact."

Freeman's shift lasts 2.5 hours. She looks for suspicious footprints that could have stepped inside the colony. Or for any volleyballs being thrown around—one wrong serve could crush an egg. Visitors ask her why such a large portion of the beach is blocked off by pink tape.

Rosa Rivera and Jaime Plana, from Boca Raton, aren't birdwatchers but

ran into the colony in May. They quickly became some of its most dedicated stewards—volunteering every evening, five days a week.

"This has never happened, so why not dedicate a little time just to see them procreating and going back home?" said Rivera.

Rivera wears a shirt with a picture of the birds and a hat with the name spelled out, so it makes it easier for visitors to understand. She knows the birds' personalities now, from bullying teenagers to struggling lovers.

"The male bird tried to mate with the female and he didn't even have a fish to give her!" said Rivera. "Just like a typical guy."

And like a mother protecting her eggs, Rivera is defensive over the colony and won't let any beachgoers disturb their peace. Wiley said four of the chicks have been crushed to death by people walking over them.

She's already had to stop people from stepping into the colony, including a man who was so startled he became tangled up in the pink tape surrounding the border.

"This big bodybuilder-type man was there with his wife and grandchildren and he started screaming at him," Rivera said. "The (intruder) got so scared he fell."

Wiley said the majority of beachgoers are respectful of the colony, and is a major reason why it has survived even after the beaches opened up. There was a fear that when the humans returned, the adults would abandon their chicks.

"When they were flying over Deerfield they must have felt the vibes of the beach," Wiley said.

On July 7, the least tern became the official city bird of Deerfield Beach. Though they will probably never return, City Commissioner Michael Hudack sees the birds as a way to tie everything together: COVID-19, the benefits of isolation and the impact humans have on the environment.

Hudack encourages Deerfield Beach residents to observe the colony before they're gone.

By late July, most of the birds will have departed for their winter home in South America. Hundreds have left already with their young.

"Like the deer, least terns previously made Deerfield Beach their home," Hudack said. "And now they've returned."

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