

# A strange tern of events

## Something amiss with the endangered birds that nest on the roof of Kmart

By **TOM McLAUGHLIN** Daily News Staff Writer

Local bird watchers have been eyeballing the rooftop of the Kmart store off Beal Parkway in Fort Walton Beach, trying to figure out what's creating havoc with the flock of endangered least terns nesting there.

Since the beginning of the week Mary Coerver, an animal rehabilitator associated with the Emerald Coast Wildlife Refuge, has found more than 30 dead tern chicks on the ground at the base of the Kmart building.

She's found at least that many live chicks running around in the store's parking lot.

Most of the birds were pulled from a single rain gutter.

The situation is both sad and frustrating, Coerver said. Last year, thanks to cooperation from Kmart, the state Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the local Audubon Society, she didn't find a single dead or orphaned bird at Kmart.

Now she's got 110 bird mouths to feed, including a flock of baby terns.

"I'm totally overwhelmed," she said. "I spend half my time with a seine net, catching fish for all these mouths I have to feed."

For about five years now, the extremely rare least terns have been using the white Kmart roof as a nesting site. It has replaced the unpeopled, open coastal beaches where they nested before unoccupied beach became scarce.

Coerver said about 110 birds reside on the roof during nesting season. From now until around August, the newly hatched chicks are flightless and running around on top of the Kmart.

With the permission of store management, fencing has been placed around the roof to protect the young birds, which previously had tended to run off the roof when frightened.

On Friday, Nonie Maines and Lenny Fenimore, two members of the local chapter of the Audubon Society, were using a camera borrowed from Eglin Air Force Base biologists to see if they could figure out what was causing the chicks to fall.

"We couldn't see the problem," Maines said.

The only way the birders will be able to determine what is causing the tern deaths is by climbing up on the roof, Maines said, and because the animals are endangered, that would be illegal.

"As soon as the birds see anyone they would immediately head toward the edge. That would lead to a bigger problem," Fenimore said.

The Audubon Society members say that the bird deaths, while worrisome, do not constitute a crisis.

"You hate to see any bird die, but in a natural setting on the beach predators would be getting them too," Fenimore said.

Audubon has been beating the bushes for volunteers willing to walk or drive the Kmart parking lot looking for chicks. The baby terns can be replaced on the roof if located quickly enough after being separated from their parents. If not they can be placed under the watchful eye of someone like Coerver.

Maines said only three volunteers have come forward.

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Daily News/MARI DARR-WELCH

Lenny Fenimore uses a long pole and security camera to view terns nesting on top of the Kmart in Fort Walton Beach on Friday afternoon.



Daily News/MARK KULAW

**A least tern nests along the causeway in Navarre Beach recently.**

## **WANT TO VOLUNTEER?**

To help the Audubon Society rescue endangered least tern chicks who have fallen from their nests, call Nonie Maines, president of the regional chapter, at 862-9588.