

Protecting the least among us

Group aims to save endangered bird with reinforced fence

By **TOM McLAUGHLIN** Daily News Staff Writer

Facing an intruder much larger than themselves, a group of roof-nesting least terns fought back the best way they knew how.

Bird dookie.

"One of their defenses is they'll dump on ya," Lenny Fenimore of the Choctawhatchee Audubon Society said Wednesday morning as he checked his ball cap for direct hits.

What the birds didn't seem to realize is that even though Fenimore had found a way to sneak up on them — the bucket of a fire department's ladder truck — he had no intention of invading their nesting space at the Fort Walton Beach Kmart.

He was trying to save their babies.

The Ocean City-Wright Fire Department provided its ladder truck and three firefighters to assist the Audubon Society in searching for clues to how about 60 tern chicks managed recently to fall off the roof.

Approximately 30 of the endangered animals were found dead on the ground last week and another 28 were saved by animal rehabilitator Mary Coerver too late to return them to the rooftop.

Nonie Maines, the local Audubon Society's president, found how the chicks managed to escape fencing that surrounds the roof when she took her turn in the bucket. Screws used in installing fencing around the building to protect the terns had come loose, leaving gaping holes.

Maines didn't have the tools to reattach the chicken wire fencing, so she did what she could by wadding up the fencing material she'd brought with her and shoving it into the open holes.

"There's only so much we can do," Fenimore explained from the ground. It is illegal to disturb the terns during their nesting season, and climbing onto the roof would be considered a definite no-no.

The firefighters enlisted to assist in the bird rescue — engineer Ryan Christen, firefighter Rick Lara and firefighter Brian Tanner — confessed to not knowing too much about least terns but said they were glad to help the Audubon Society.

"It's unconventional. We don't usually get out and do things like this," Christen said.

Recent publicity of the plight of the Kmart least terns had drawn attention to the birds, their nesting habits and the recently intensified efforts to save them.

The least tern, smallest member of the tern species, once nested on lightly vegetated area beaches, where its flightless young could run for the cover of sea oats when predators approached.

When humans took over the beaches, the least terns moved to white rooftops like those at the Kmart, and have done quite well there. The only drawback to the new nesting sites seems to be the instinct of the young to run when frightened. That tends to send them off the rooftops.

Kmart management has been working with the Audubon Society since 2002 to protect the young terns. In 2004 the company installed the approximately foot-high chicken wire fences that encircle its entire roof.

No chicks were found, either alive or dead, on the ground at Kmart last year, Fenimore said. That's what made what occurred last week worrisome.

It is theorized that noise generated by the crowds at the Billy Bowlegs Parade may have been enough to send the baby birds through the holes in the Kmart fence. From there they would have landed in a gutter and either been washed down or fallen into the storm drain near where most were found.

While Maines' make-do effort to clog the fence holes might work for the next couple of months, Fenimore said someone will have to go up on the Kmart roof when nesting season is over in August and repair the damage.

Until then seven volunteers, up from just three two days ago, have offered to patrol the store parking lot in search of dead or injured chicks.

And this year, for the first time, the Audubon Society has funds with which to work with managers of the estimated 38 other area buildings in Okaloosa County that have terns nesting on them. Efforts will be focused on encouraging the building owners to take the kind of action Kmart has.

"This is the only building I'm aware of that has a fence around it," Fenimore said.

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Above, juvenile least terns sit behind a small fence placed on top of the Fort Walton Beach Kmart to keep the young birds from falling from the roof until they are able to fly. Below, Choctawhatchee Audubon Society volunteer Nonie Maines makes repairs to a hole where the terns were falling into the gutter.

Least terns

Length:
8.5 inches
Wingspan:
20 inches

- Endangered species in Florida
- Nesting season: April to August
- Have been nesting on white gravel roofs, such as the one at the Kmart in Fort Walton Beach, because the roofs mimic the shorebirds' natural nesting grounds on beaches, which are being overtaken by development

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