

CROW Case Of The Week:

## Least Tern

by Emilie Alfino



Least tern

A least tern came into the CROW clinic from Lover's Key State Park, where there is a nesting area on the beach. There are a couple of places around Lee County where least terns nest, including Fort Myers Beach and possibly Sanibel, according to Dr. Amber MacNamara.

The woman who found her was a park ranger. She'd been out doing rounds and saw this nesting area below the wrack line all by itself. The ranger continued her rounds and when she came back to the nest, the bird was still there. She approached her and the bird tried to fly but couldn't, managing only a couple of feet.

The ranger then arranged for transport of the least tern to CROW and the tiny bird arrived at the clinic June 9. She weighed 36.8 grams, which is not very much. "When people picture terns, they picture a royal tern with the orange beak," Dr. Amber said. "But these least terns are about the size of a sanderling, but they are terns."

Upon examination, she did not have any fractures, which was good, and really no wounds to speak of – she was just dehydrated and kind of weak in general, Dr. Amber said.

"We gave her some fluids both under the skin and orally with Chinese herb we use a lot for patients who are weak, to boost their energy and appetite and help build muscle," Dr. Amber said. The herb is called Four Gentlemen. The bird was also given vitamins B and C, and that was all for the first day.

There was good news that first day: she ate two fish! "We had to dig through every package of fish and pull out the tiniest ones because most of the fish were as big as she was," Dr. Amber said.

The little tern started eating more and more (fresh fish four times a day!) and got up to 39.3 grams by June 19. "I wasn't sure she would be very likely to eat, so I was really happy when she did," Dr. Amber said. "We were keeping her in the incubator for the first five days."

On the fifth day, she was moved out to a cage and staff continued to feed her once a day. "We put her in a bathtub every morning with salt water so she could bathe if she wanted to and gave her a heat lamp to dry off," Dr. Amber said.

At this point, the little bird was still active and getting stronger, but not flying. Dr. Amber was waiting for her to give some kind of clue or signal that she was ready.

Then about a week later, the clinic took in a fledgling least tern with some injuries to her leg, and having the two birds together – same-species company – was good for both of them.

"Terns are kind of tricky when it comes to test flying," Dr. Amber explained. "They need that big, open space of the beach and the gulf to take off. Many times they can't or don't want to. It's hard to tell when they're ready to fly."

On June 23, this healed least tern took off, flew around the clinic, and looked amazing.

"We started making arrangements to get her back to Lovers



Least tern

Key, where we hope she lives today," Dr. Amber concluded. "We don't know what caused her initial weakness but she came through it and was better at the other side."

CROW (Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife, Inc.) is a non-profit wildlife hospital providing veterinary care for native and migratory wildlife from the Gulf Coast of Florida. The hospital accepts patients seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mail donations to PO Box 150, Sanibel, FL 33957. Call 472-3644 or visit: [www.crowclinic.org](http://www.crowclinic.org).✧