

# Terns Share Naval Surface Warfare Center

by Jim Sartain

The Naval Surface Warfare Center's Coastal Systems Station (CSS) at Panama City, Florida, promotes a natural resources program that delicately balances its military mission and conservation issues. In 1994, for example, the CSS recognized a need to protect the least tern (*Sterna antillarum*), a species listed by the state of Florida as endangered.

Least terns are ground nesting birds that need open sites upon which to lay their eggs, and they found the flat, gravel-topped roofs of buildings at the CCS to their liking. Facility managers took action to protect the birds by installing a one foot (30 centimeter) high fence around the "A" wing roof of Building 110 to prevent chicks from falling the four stories to the ground. Later, the "chick fence" was expanded to include three additional wings. In 1998, the CSS went a step further by placing wood shipping pallets on the roof to provide the chicks cover from their natural predator, the fish crow (*Corvus ossifragus*). Two years later, the CSS replaced the wooden pallets with more durable plastic pallets and funded a contract to replace the roof of wing "A".

The CSS Natural Resources Manager (NRM) reviews every incoming contract at the facility to evaluate potential impacts on endangered, threatened, and special interest species. During the review for re-roofing Building 110, the NRM made three recommendations to protect the terns: 1) all work had to be accomplished between September 1 and April 1 of each year to avoid the nesting season; 2) regardless of the type of roof planned, it had to be covered with at least one inch (2.5 cm) of very small, smooth river gravel; and 3) the chick

fence and plastic pallets had to be repositioned upon completion.

In addition to the re-roofing, all unnecessary equipment, antennas, and flight-hindering obstacles were removed. As a result of these actions, the facility saw an increase in the number of nesting pairs on the "A" wing roof from two pairs in previous years to four pairs in 2000.

The CCS is using the media, pamphlets, intranet, and internet to educate military, civilian, and contract personnel about the least tern and its environment. In addition, the facility now restricts

access to roof locations during nesting periods. Thanks to the Navy's efforts, the total population of least terns at the CSS (including all buildings) rose from 39 nesting pairs in 1999 to 64 pairs in 2000. By taking steps today for this state-listed bird, the CCS hopes to make a federal listing unnecessary.

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**Plastic pallets held down by sand bags provide cover for least terns nesting on a rooftop.**

*Photos by Jim Sartain/U.S. Navy*

