

# Calendar

## Tidy Up for Terns

### Nesting Site Cleanup

**L**ots of plastic — that's the bulk of the load; that's what's persistent," says Irvin Fernandez, acting refuge manager of the Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge, in describing what volunteers will be picking up on Saturday morning during the annual cleanup. Water bottles, pieces of Styrofoam coolers, and plastic oil cans are the main quarry. Last year, the haul was approximately 750 pounds, including heavier, bulkier, nonplastic items, like tires and lost lobster traps — "anything that floats,"

according to one volunteer from the San Diego Audubon Society.

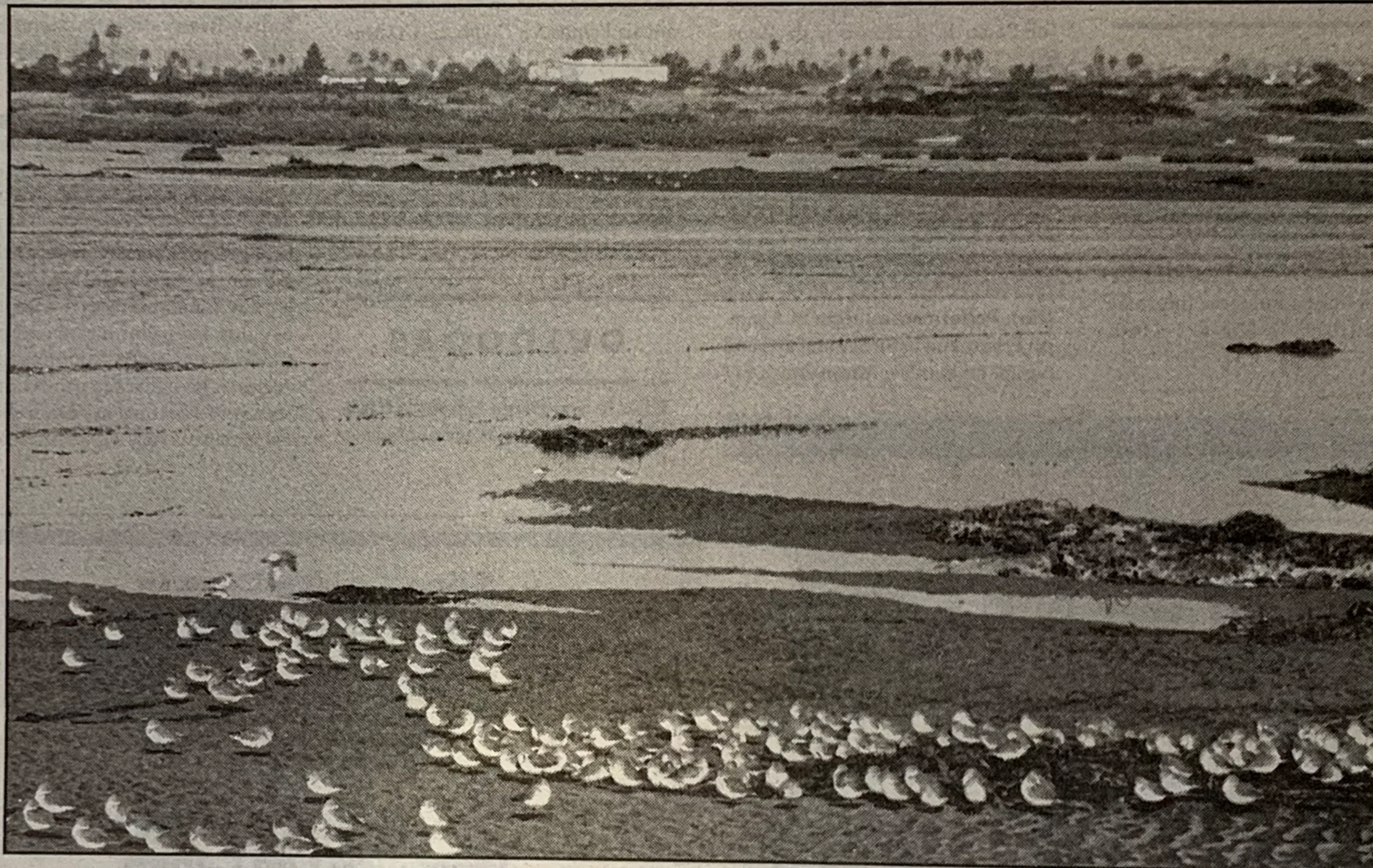
Fernandez intimates that the debris represents only part of the problem. "It comes down the Tijuana River, and there are associated things that come with it." And although he declines to elaborate, plenty of other people through the years have been vocal about urging the International Boundary and Water Commission to keep some of those "associated things" — raw sewage and industrial waste — from entering the Tijuana River Valley in the first place.

"But if we talk about those things, then it gets complicated," says Fernandez, "and we lose our focus." Nor can they be eliminated by a band of volunteers with trash bags. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service doesn't ignore the more difficult aspects of the problem, says Fernandez. "We're just not addressing them in the cleanup."

The cleanup site is the normally restricted nesting ground of endangered California least terns and snowy plovers.



Trash on river estuary



Tijuana River estuary

Biologists alone are allowed to enter the area from March 15 to September 15, when the birds are breeding.

Neither species builds nests of twigs or other found materials. Instead, they lay eggs in ground nests, consisting of little more than "pockets in the sand," difficult even for a trained eye to see and all too easy for a foot to trample. "That's the reason we closed off the area," says Fernandez, who urges visitors and their dogs to stay on the trails in any season. After all, the refuge has six miles of them.

Pulling out invasive, nonnative plants is another chore scheduled for Saturday. Ice plant and tamarisk are two of the unwelcome species. Found along the shoreline and in the dunes, they take hold after what Fernandez calls "disturbances." Road building is the big one, along with the traffic that naturally follows. Invasive plants don't mind soil that has been compacted by vehicles. In time, they can crowd out less adaptable native plants that the birds depend upon to provide camouflage for their ground nests.

Some of the taller invasive plants would seem to be good cover and therefore helpful plants. But no, says Jim Peugh, who is the San Diego Audubon chapter's coastal and wetlands conservation chair: predator birds can use them as perches to find the tern and plover chicks.

Peugh describes the plovers as "chubby little birds with real short beaks." *The Sibley Guide to Birds* lists the plover's length as 6¼ inches, exactly that of the house sparrow. The picture in the increasingly popular reference book shows a standing bird that looks puffed-up, chest-heavy, slightly precarious. The full view isn't often seen in reality, says Peugh. "On a beach they hide in footprints. They're invisible. Then all of a sudden you'll look over and spy a bunch of little heads. They're secretive little birds."

Terns, not much larger than plovers, are fashionably slim. "Streamlined beautifully, with sharply pointed wings and sharp bills, they are very attractively designed," says Peugh. "And they're not the least bit secretive." In the sky they are recognizable by their "buoyant flight," says Peugh. "You know when a butterfly flies? Its body goes up and down as it moves its wings? The terns fly kind of like that, except that their movement is not as extreme. And when they forage for food, they are fairly public about it. I have been out rowing, and they've been diving all around me. They go into the water just an inch or so and grab whole fish. And you can tell if they have been successful, because you can see the fish in their beak."

Both terns and plovers are so small you have to wonder how they can

survive in an open environment, says Peugh. "Remember, they don't wear boots or Patagonia jackets."

Such gear is recommended for the humans who join the crew on Saturday. Or, if it's sunny, hats and sunscreen. In either case, bring work gloves and weeding tools, if you have them. Binoculars, too, although the terns and plovers won't be there.

Where do they go in winter? It's a question Holden Caulfield might have asked. But J.D. Salinger's character, who wondered in vain about the Central Park ducks, wouldn't get a satisfactory answer about these birds, either. "No one knows where they go," says Peugh. "It's somewhere south of here. Apparently, it's not well understood what they do during the off-season."

— Jeanne Schinto

**Clean up the least tern/snowy plover nesting site**  
Tijuana Slough,  
National Wildlife Refuge  
Imperial Beach  
Saturday, December 8,  
9:00 a.m.–noon  
**Directions:** At the end of Imperial Beach Blvd., turn left on Seacoast Dr. Go to end; park in marked spaces; meet at observation deck  
**Free**  
**Info and RSVP:** 619-224-4591 or 619-575-2704

**Local Events**  
page 69

**Classical Music**  
page 82

**Art Museums & Galleries**  
page 85

**Theater**  
page 88

**Pop Music**  
page 93

**Restaurants**  
page 117

**Movies**  
page 129

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE ALLEN