

Concrete threatens little tern . . .

The endangered little tern faces a grim future in Japan.

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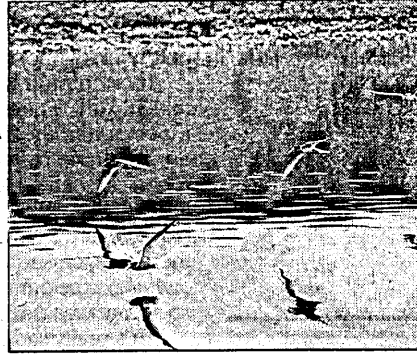
A more desolate site would be hard to find.

It is a barren, windswept delta of rocks and sand, jammed between floodgates and a water pipeline in a river snaking its way through the commuter suburbs south of Tokyo. But this artificially created island in the middle of the Sagami River is a perfect haven for an expanding colony of sterna albifrons sinensis, the little tern.

Few people on this side of the world have even heard of the tiny migratory shorebird, with its distinctive dark crown and sharp orange beak.

It's surprising, given that the plucky tern, one of the most critically endangered bird species, is one of Japan's great serial immigrants.

Despite its small frame and wing



Atsugi City councillor Hiroshi Takada looks out over a colony of little terns.

span of less than 30 centimetres, the little tern embarks on an epic 6000-kilometre-plus journey every year, winging its way north from Australasia to nesting grounds in northern Asia.

The marshlands of the Kanto Plains, on which Tokyo is based, have long been a favored location.

The terns leave their homes along Australia's eastern and southern shorelines each autumn in search of the northern summer. Researchers speculate that they island hop to save energy, moving along the Asian shoreline in a complicated, three-week-long flight path that is faithfully

repeated each year. Easy prey for predators, the terns fly only at night, nurture their own elaborate radar systems and the constellations to map their route.

Then, in nesting grounds across eastern Asia, they lay their eggs, nurture their young, and as the summer fades, begin the long journey home.

The journey is only half the challenge, for the little traveller faces as much risk inside Japan as it does getting there.

Experts say the species is in danger of being wiped out because of its own fastidious nesting instincts and

Japan's famous concreting mania.

Tokyo's marshlands are a fading memory amid the city's population squeeze. What natural riverbanks are left are swarming with four-wheel-drive vehicles and holidaymakers.

The garbage they bring attracts predators like cats and crows which quickly swoop on the unprotected eggs.

"Unfortunately, the Japanese lifestyle is a very real danger to the dwindling tern population," says Yuzo Murofushi, a biology teacher who has spent most of his life researching the migratory birds.

Nowhere is this plight more evi-

dent than at Atsugi, about 70 kilometres south of Tokyo.

The Atsugi sanctuary was produced when the local water authority installed floodgates on the Sagami River. Officials then noticed the appeal of the delta to bird life a few years ago.

This week, a colony of 364 terns swirled around the delta, their shrill cries piercing the heavy, damp atmosphere.

But locals say the sanctuary is threatened by the city's plan to build an 11-metre-wide road and a multi-purpose sporting facility on the river bank, within 200 metres of the delta.

City officials say the construction of the road poses no problems for the little tern population.

Hiroshi Takada, an Atsugi City councillor, disagrees, saying the easier access will only encourage more people to flock to the site.

Hakuo Mishii, a local, says the road plan is "typical of the attitude of Japanese authorities". "If there is a bare patch of earth, they want to concrete it," he says.

The council will decide the future of the road in a few weeks. It seems certain to get the go ahead.