

## Birds in Love

By Celeste Silling

If you are looking for some romance tips this Valentine's day, look no further. Birds have some of the most elaborate courtship displays in the animal kingdom, and they're here to share their wisdom with you.

It's always a good idea to bring your date a gift. During courtship, the male Least Tern will dive down into the water to catch a fish for his love. Once he has a sufficient prize for her, he will land and approach the female, letting her see the fish in his beak. As if to emphasize the freshness of the catch, the male will shake the fish around, making it flop and wiggle all the more.



A Least Tern male dangles a fish in front of a female. Photo Credit: Mike Williams

If the female Least Tern is interested in the fish, she will try to take it. But if she is interested in the handsome bird holding the fish, she will turn her back to him and let him approach her tail. Now the male will stand behind her, dangling the fish over her head, shaking it back and forth and sometimes even hitting the female with it. As if hypnotized, the female will shake her head in time with the fish, and eventually hunker down to let the male mount. He copulates while still wagging the fish.

The Magnificent Frigatebird spends most of its time in the air or on the water, but it nests on land, preferring to do so in mangrove forests or other trees and bushes. The male has an enormous, bright red inflatable air sac on his chest which he expands to attract females. To get their attention, he will clack his bill, wave his head back and forth, flutter his wings and call loudly in one of the more flamboyant displays known to bird-kind.

The male Piping Plover puts a great deal of thought and effort into his courtship. In order to woo his mate, he has to make the perfect nest for their eggs. His nest is called a "scrape" and he makes it by digging a shallow hole in the sand. To make a truly attractive scrape, he will sometimes place pieces of small white shells in and around the bowl. When complete, the male will perform an aerial display for the female to get her attention until she comes over to inspect the nest.

The Piping Plover's nest must be perfect. It has to be in the right location, have just the right amount of surrounding vegetation, and of course be skillfully made. If she likes it, the female will squat down in the scrape, trying it on for size. Now the male will initiate his courtship dance. He stands tall, puffs out his chest, and quickly stomps the ground with his feet. Still dancing, he approaches the female until he is actually kicking her rump with his stomps. If he's lucky, she'll approve the whole courtship and let him copulate then and there.

Now you have some truly effective romance tips at your disposal. Like the Least Tern, bring a gift for your date. Like the Magnificent Frigatebird, dress to impress. And finally, like the Piping plover, show what a great home you can make for your mate. With these tips, it is guaranteed to be a great Valentine's day!