



Interior Least Terns were once called sea swallows for its delicate, graceful and buoyant flights over water. Photo by Dina Barta, Nebraska Game & Parks Commission.

CONSERVATION HELP

Landowners can help conserve least terns by reporting nesting sites to the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission at 402-471-0641.

Individuals can help by donating to conservation organizations dedicated to protecting threatened and endangered species. These donations provide much funding for needed research, habitat improvement projects and education.

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Interior Least Terns have a sharp, pointed beak adapted to picking fish out of water. Photo by Joel Jorgensen, NGPC.

This pamphlet, "Nebraska's Threatened & Endangered Species: Interior Least Tern" is one of a series of pamphlets about Nebraska's rare species. To learn more about Nebraska's rare species, please visit rarespecies.nebraska.gov.

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NOTE: New data of the occurrence and distribution of this species are being collected constantly and some of the information in the pamphlet may be outdated. The information in this pamphlet should be used for a general understanding of the species and not as the sole source of range location for any report, project, regional or local planning, or for environmental impact assessments. For current information on this species, please contact the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission, Wildlife Division.

Nebraska's Threatened & Endangered Species



Interior Least Tern *Sternula antillarum athalassos*



A Publication of the Nebraska Game & Parks Commission

Interior Least Tern

Sternula antillarum athalassos

DESCRIPTION

The interior least tern is a feisty, swallow-like bird 8-9 inches long with a wingspan of 20 inches. It is the smallest tern species in North America. It was once called sea swallow for its delicate, graceful and buoyant flights over water.

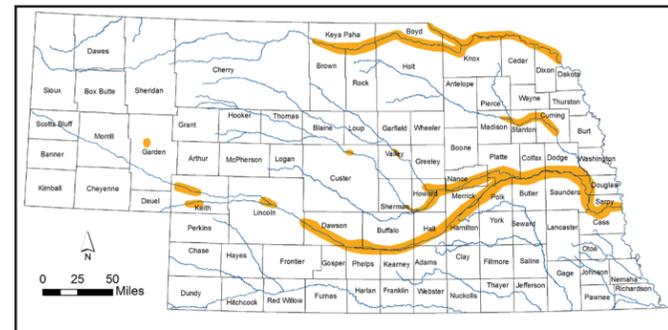
Adult least terns have a black crown, white forehead and undersurface, pale gray back and wings and a black-tipped yellow-orange bill. The short legs and webbed feet of the male are orange while the females are pale yellow. The long, black outermost wing feathers and the short, deeply forked tail are conspicuous in flight. Immature least terns are darker gray than the adults. They have a dark bill, a dark gray eye stripe, a white forehead and a dusky brown cap.

RANGE

Historically, the breeding range of interior least terns extended from Texas to Montana and from Colorado and New Mexico to Indiana. Today, they occupy scattered areas of their former range.

Least terns arrive in Nebraska from their wintering grounds in Central and South America between mid-May and early June.

In Nebraska, the terns breed along the Platte, Niobrara and Missouri rivers. Isolated breeding colonies can also be found throughout the Elkhorn and Loup River systems. They migrate south beginning in mid to late August and winters along the Central American coast and the northern coast



Interior Least Tern Range Map. Courtesy Nebraska Game & Parks Commission Natural Heritage Program. 2013.



An adult Interior Least Tern walks on an open sandbar along the Platte River in central Nebraska. Open, vegetation-free sandbars are the preferred habitat of Interior Least Terns. Photo by: NEBRASKAland Magazine/NGPC.

of South America from Venezuela to northeastern Brazil.

HABITAT

During the breeding season, Least Terns typically nest and raise young on dry riverine sandbars in wide, braided rivers, and along the shores of reservoirs and lakes. They can also be found nesting on sand and gravel piles at mining operations near rivers.



Interior Least Terns utilize barren, vegetation-free sandbars and sandpits for breeding. The open habitat provides ample opportunity to see predators. Photo by: NEBRASKAland Magazine/NGPC

DIET

Interior least terns prey on small fish. When foraging, the terns hover over the water before diving in to catch a small fish in their bill. Adults and young birds swallow the fish whole, head first and usually in one gulp. They will also occasionally eat insects, but the vast majority of their diet is small fish.

REPRODUCTION

Interior least terns establish nest sites upon returning to breeding grounds from their wintering grounds. Courtship occurs at or near the nest site. This courtship includes the "fish flight," an aerial display involving pursuit and maneuvers ending in a fish transfer between the two birds. Other courtship behaviors include nest scraping, copulation and a variety of postures and vocalizations.

Least terns nest close to each other, which is a behavior termed colonial. To protect their nest and chicks, adult least terns dive-bomb, defecate on and shriek at intruders in a mobbing fashion to persuade the invader to leave the nesting colony.

Females lay two to three eggs directly on the sand, in a small bowl-shaped dugout. The eggs are incubated, by both male and female, for about three weeks. The chicks are a sandy-brown color with white under parts and tiny black spots on their head and back. This coloration helps camouflage the chicks in their sandy nest.

Chicks fledge, or leave the nest, within two days of hatching and can fly at about 21 days. Parental care continues after they have fledged, but by early August the young birds are usually on their own. Young terns begin leaving the breeding area in late August. This is usually complete by early September.

POPULATION STATUS

Historically, least terns were hunted in the 1800's for the commercial use of its feathers to decorate ladies' hats. After the signing of the 1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which prohibited the sale, purchase, taking or possession of any wild migratory bird or bird parts (such as feathers), commercial harvesting became illegal and the species population began to increase throughout the 1940's.

However, human development, habitat alteration,



An Interior Least Tern chick seeks shade under a small plant. Photo by: Joel Jorgensen, Nebraska Game & Parks Commission

and habitat destruction in the form of river channelization and reservoir construction subsequently lead to another rapid population decline.

By the mid-1970's, least tern populations had decreased by more than 80 percent from the 1940's. The interior least tern was federally listed as endangered in 1985. Today, interior least terns are still facing threats of continued habitat loss, human disturbance, pollution and disease.

MANAGEMENT & OUTLOOK

In Nebraska, efforts continue to be made to monitor and protect nesting colonies, educate the public about this endangered species, and to restore, create and protect important river habitat.

In the recent past, numbers of interior least terns have increased in some areas, but populations are still endangered.



An Interior Least Tern guards its nest. Both male and female parents provide parental care for young. Photo by: NEBRASKAland Magazine/NGPC.