



The Endangered Interior Least Tern in Dallas, Denton, and Tarrant Counties, Texas



The interior least tern (*Sternula antillarum*) was federally listed as endangered in 1985 (50 FR 21792) without critical habitat. Unlike most terns, it nests in the “interior” of the United States, where it receives full protection under the Endangered Species Act except within 50 miles of the Gulf Coast. Historically, the tern nested on inland rivers from Texas to Montana and from eastern Colorado and New Mexico to southern Indiana. Currently, the tern occurs in remnant colonies within the historic distribution. Wintering occurs along the Central American and northern South American coasts.

Description

The interior least tern is the smallest North American tern, averaging 8 inches in length with a 20-inch wingspan. Breeding adults have a gray back, white undersurface, black-capped crown, white forehead, yellow bill with dark tip, and yellow to orange legs. Both male and female are alike. Immature birds have darker plumage than adults, a dark bill, and dark eye stripes on their white forehead. Terns arrive in Texas from late April to early June and spend 3 to 5 months at their breeding grounds. The breeding season is usually complete by late August, and most birds have departed for the wintering grounds by mid-September. Least terns nest in colonies and feed primarily on small fish.



Interior least tern adult on breeding grounds.

Habitat

Natural nesting habitat for the interior least tern includes bare or sparsely vegetated salt flats, broad sandbars, and barren shores along wide, shallow rivers and lakes. Favorable nesting habitat occurs along sand and gravel bars within wide unobstructed river channels, or open flats along shores of lakes and reservoirs. Because natural nesting sites have become sparse, least terns have also adapted to using non-traditional nesting habitat within their range. Non-traditional nesting habitat includes sand and gravel pits, dredge islands, dirt roads, and gravel rooftops.



Natural breeding habitat for the interior least tern on the Canadian River.

Dallas, Denton, and Tarrant Counties

In Texas, the interior least tern is known to breed on the Rio Grande, Red, and Canadian River systems. In recent years, areas near the Trinity River have been utilized by nesting terns. Since 1992, terns have nested at non-traditional habitat near the Trinity River in southeast Dallas County. Nesting activity was recently expanded to include an area along the Elm Fork in northwest Dallas County and southeast Denton County, and along the West Fork in Tarrant County.

An additional siting of a juvenile tern was made in 2002 within the Clear Fork drainage around Benbrook Reservoir. Non-traditional breeding habitats within North Texas Counties have several characteristics in common thought to attract migrating birds to the area. These include: 1) close proximity to the Trinity River 2) availability of food and 3) suitable nesting substrate.



Interior least tern nest on oil well pad.

Trinity River - All of the known occurrences in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex are located within two miles of the Trinity River. Major river systems within the tern's range, including the Trinity, are most likely used as migratory corridors during the breeding season. Migrating birds leaving the wintering grounds search for suitable areas to breed along major inland rivers. The lack of suitable nesting habitat within the Trinity River channel itself, may lead breeding birds to seek habitat away from the river and settle in areas providing food and nesting substrate.

Food - Shallow waters with small fish are essential for a least tern colony. The necessity of an adequate food supply within breeding habitat is not dependent on the presence of the Trinity River. Although the river may be the source of food for some colonies, other colonies are reported using ponds and shallow lakes at or close to the nesting colony. Terns nesting on non-traditional habitat may fly up to 2 miles to their food source.

Substrate - As with natural breeding habitat, the lack of significant vegetation growing on preferred non-traditional nesting substrate is necessary. Suitable substrates include relatively flat areas of gravel, sand, shell, dredge spoil, sewage plant spoil, and road base used for unpaved roads. Nesting habitat is usually devoid of vegetation, however, nests can occur in preferred substrate with up to 30% vegetative cover. The terns are adapted to recently disturbed areas, which includes natural habitat such as river sandbars that migrate within the channel in response to changes in flow. Newly disturbed non-traditional habitat, such as gravel or sand pits, are also attractive to breeding birds especially if it is near the Trinity River corridor and a food supply is present.



Interior least tern chick on gravel rooftop. *Photo by J.T. Boylan, Dallas Zoo.*

For more information on threatened and endangered species, visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Southwest Region's website at: <http://www.fws.gov/southwest>, or contact the Arlington Ecological Services Field Office at:

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