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Trump Administration Celebrates Recovery of America's Smallest Tern

Across interior least tern's 18-state range, populations continue to grow and flourish

After more than three decades of conservation partnerships inspired by the Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is celebrating the delisting of the interior least tern due to recovery. According to the best available science, the diverse efforts of local, state and federal stakeholders across the interior least tern's 18-state range have helped ensure populations are healthy, stable and increasing into the foreseeable future. The tern will continue to be protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

“The Trump Administration and Secretary Bernhardt are committed to the recovery of our Nation's imperiled species,” said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Aurelia Skipwith. “Dozens of states, federal agencies, tribes, businesses and conservation groups have worked tirelessly over the course of three decades to successfully recover these birds.”

When the interior least tern was listed under the ESA in 1985, there were fewer than 2,000 birds and only a few dozen nesting sites scattered across a once-expansive range that covered America's Great Plains and Lower Mississippi Valley. Today, there are more than 18,000 interior least terns at more than 480 nesting sites in 18 states.

To help ensure the species' continued success, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which has jurisdictional authority over much of the interior least tern's range, has made formal post-delisting monitoring and conservation commitments that encompass about 80% of the breeding population.

In 2005, the Corps coordinated a range-wide monitoring event that confirmed tern populations were increasing over the previous two decades. The Corps also funded, with the assistance of the Service, the development of a habitat-driven, range-wide population model for the species. This complex model, developed with the [American Bird Conservancy](#), considers interior least tern

status and population dynamics with and without continued management at local, regional and range-wide scales across a 30-year period.

“The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is absolutely honored to play a role in a partnership that serves as a model for the potential delisting of other species in the future,” said Major General Diana Holland, Commander of the Mississippi Valley Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. “For over 30 years, we have partnered with the Service to monitor, conserve and recover this endangered species along the Lower Mississippi River. That partnership demonstrates that, through collaboration, we can protect and recover an endangered species while continuing to provide critical navigation and flood control benefits to the nation.”

“Without the commitment and partnership of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the recovery of the interior least tern would not have been possible,” said Service Regional Director Leopoldo Miranda. “The Corps has implemented conservation measures over the course of decades that have improved habitat for terns along some of America’s largest rivers, such as the Missouri and the Mississippi, and these actions have been central to the tern’s recovery.”

“Today’s announcement is welcome news for conservationists in Wyoming and around the country,” said Senator John Barrasso (R-Wyo.). “After years of hard work and collaboration, the interior least tern will be officially removed from the endangered species list. Since its listing in 1985, Wyoming, Colorado, and Nebraska have worked in good faith with landowners, conservation groups, and the federal government to preserve critical habitat and recover this bird. The Platte River Recovery Implementation Plan played a critical role in this success story. It now serves as a model for future conservation efforts.”

Least terns are the smallest members of the tern family and feed primarily on small fish. They are generally considered seabirds, but several species are also found along rivers, lakes or other wetlands. They nest along more than 2,800 miles of river channel habitat across the Great Plains and the Lower Mississippi Valley and winter in the Caribbean and South America.

States where tern colonies occur are Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee and Texas.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, least terns were decimated by harvest for their feathers, which were used for making hats. Their nesting habitats were also flooded or degraded by dams and other forms of large river channel engineering during the mid-20th century. Due to the impact of these threats, the bird was listed as endangered under the ESA in 1985 as a distinct population segment of least tern.

Federal and state agencies and industrial partners have all contributed to the interior least tern's successful recovery. Depending upon local conditions and needs, active habitat management has included: monitoring, protection of nesting areas, improved water flows, dredge material placement, vegetation and predator control. Many of these beneficial activities have become standard practices and will continue after the interior least tern is delisted, such as management and monitoring efforts by states, federal agencies and industries.

The ESA requires the Service to implement a post-delisting monitoring plan for the tern for a minimum of five years after delisting to ensure that it remains stable. The plan will include a commitment by the Corps to continue monitoring the species as an indicator of healthy river ecosystems. The Service will publish a notice of the availability when the post-delisting monitoring plan becomes available.

Additional Background on ESA Improvements and Accomplishments

No administration in history has recovered more imperiled species in their first term than the Trump Administration. Since 2017, 13 species have been delisted from the ESA due to recovery, and another seven species have been downlisted from endangered to threatened. To provide context for this in looking at other administrations in their first term, the Obama Administration recovered six species; the Bush Administration recovered eight species; and the Clinton Administration recovered nine species.

Fish and wildlife conservation depends on federal partnerships with states, landowners, and most importantly sportsmen who directly fund – to the tune of \$1 billion last year alone and more than \$23 billion since inception – conservation efforts by purchasing hunting and fishing licenses, fishing tackle, ammunition, boating fuel and other recreational items.

To support stronger on-the-ground conservation efforts, encourage private actions to benefit our most imperiled species and provide greater legal certainty for ESA determinations, the Service updated its ESA regulations in 2019 to improve the implementation of the law. The regulations had not been comprehensively updated since the ESA passed some 40 years ago. The Service's guidepost for the multi-year, public process was President Trump's overarching effort to reduce regulatory burden without sacrificing protections for the environment and wildlife.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov. Connect with our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/usfwssoutheast, follow our tweets at www.twitter.com/usfwssoutheast, watch our YouTube Channel at

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