



Least Tern

Oklahoma Ecological Service Field Office

Least Tern (Interior Population)

Sterna antillarum

Description

The least tern is the smallest member of the tern family at about 9 inches long (23 cm) with a wingspan of 20 inches (50 cm). They have a grayish back and wings, and snowy white undersides. Least terns have a forked tail and narrow pointed wings. They can be distinguished from all other terns by their combination of a black crown, white forehead, and a variable black-tipped yellow bill. First-year birds have a dark bill, a dark gray eye stripe, and a dusky brown cap.

Distribution

Formerly the major river systems of the Midwestern United States. These rivers included the Red, Rio Grande, Arkansas, Missouri, Ohio, and Mississippi river systems. Currently, they occur as small remnant colonies throughout their former range. In Oklahoma, least terns nest along most of the larger rivers, as well as at the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge near Jet, Oklahoma. Least terns winter in South America.

Life History

Least terns arrive at breeding sites from late April to early June where they typically spend four to five months. Pairs go through an elaborate courtship period that includes courtship feedings and a variety of postures and vocalizations. Least terns nest in small colonies on exposed salt flats, river sandbars, or reservoir beaches. Nests are small scrapes in the sand, and usually two or three eggs are laid. The young are fairly mobile soon after hatching. Both parents feed the young and remain with them until fall migration. Least terns will travel four or more miles (6+ km) from their breeding colonies to find the small fish that make up the major part of their diet.



Least Tern (Interior Population). USFWS

Conservation

The least tern was federally listed as an endangered species on May 28, 1985 (50 FR 21784). Least terns have declined due to habitat loss from permanent flooding by reservoirs and channelization projects, unpredictable water discharge patterns, and overgrowth of brush and trees. The recreational use of sandbars by humans is a major threat to the tern's reproductive success.

What Can You Do to Help

Avoid disturbing nesting areas from mid-May to late August. Pets, livestock, people, and vehicles should be kept off these areas when terns are present. Promote public awareness and report disturbance of least terns to wildlife law enforcement officials. Private landowners should manage lands to benefit habitat in nesting areas by limiting ATV and off-road vehicles use and blocking access of these vehicles to rivers. Restore or create additional nesting habitat in rivers, navigation systems, or lakes.

Purchase land or conservation easements in areas with high-quality least tern nesting habitat.

References

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1990. *Recovery plan for the interior population of the least tern *Sterna antillarum**. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Twin Cities, Minnesota. 90 pp.

For Further Information

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