

USACE Natural Resource Management

Migratory Birds



Least Tern-Interior Population

FAST FACTS

REASONS FOR LISTING STATUS: In 1985, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the population of Least Tern that occurred throughout the interior of the United States as an endangered species. At that time, the population was estimated at fewer than 2,000 adults. Interior Least Terns historically nested along sand and gravel bars of the Lower Mississippi River and its major tributaries.

As noted by the USFWS, habitat loss or degradation was a factor in the listing of the species. Dams, reservoirs, water diversion and other changes to river systems eliminated most historic Interior Least Tern nesting habitat. Wide channels dotted with sandbars, which are preferred by the terns, were replaced by narrow, armor-banked rivers with highly altered flows.

MANAGEMENT AND PROTECTION: The Interior Least Tern Working Group is a multi-agency group dedicated to improving the collection, storage, analysis, and dissemination of high quality monitoring data for Interior Least Tern populations.

HABITAT NEEDS: Interior Least Terns nest on barren to sparsely vegetated sandbars along rivers, sandy beaches and gravel pits, lake and reservoir shorelines.

- On the Missouri River, Interior Least Terns rarely nest within 150 m of shrubs or trees (>2 m in height) or other features (e.g., bluffs, bridges, or power lines) that provide high perches for avian predators or forest patches that may support mammalian predator communities.
- To support adult survival and chick growth, nesting habitat must be located within foraging range of water bodies that provide a variety of small, narrow-bodied, surface swimming fish species.
- Recreational activities on rivers and sandbars disturb nesting Least Terns, causing them to abandon their nests.

Description: This species of tern is the smallest found in North America. These 8 to 9 inch birds have a black “crown” on their head, a snowy white underside and forehead and grayish back and wings. (USFWS)

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark recorded their first observation of an Interior Least Tern on August 5, 1804 along the Missouri River, near present day Omaha, Nebraska while on their 1803-1805 “Voyage of Discovery” across North America. (2013 Tern and Plover Conservation Partnership Annual Report)

Natural Resource Management (NRM)

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August 2020

USACE ROLE: USACE has jurisdictional authority over much of the species' range. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other partners work with USACE to ensure our actions along rivers throughout the range of the species continue to provide habitat for nesting Interior Least Terns. Our work with state and private partners to protect off-river nesting areas and migration habitats is coupled with continued public education and outreach on the species' native habitat needs.

Photo: Lane Richter, Wildlife Biologist and least tern project coordinator from the Rivers Project Office, holds a banded least tern chick on the floating barge habitat.



WHAT IS USACE NRM DOING:

1 Present: In an effort to identify possible sandbar restoration sites that would be suitable for Interior Least Tern nesting above the Missouri River, the Rivers Project (USACE) began an experimental effort to see if the terns would nest on an artificial structure.

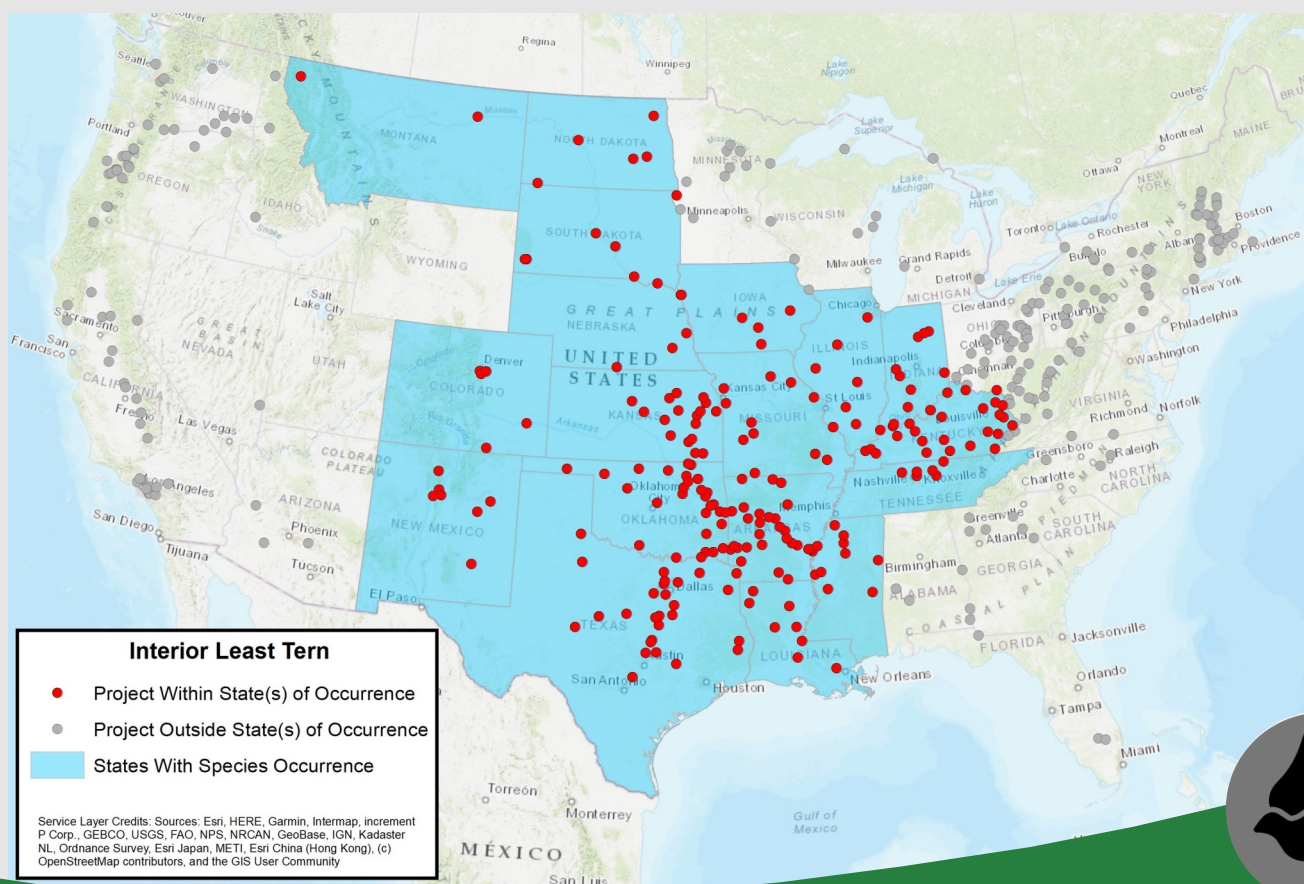
In 2009 the Rivers Project, along with partners from the Illinois Dept. of Natural Resources and the Illinois Natural History Survey, obtained two surplus dredge pontoon barges to use as floating artificial islands. Sand was placed on the barges and they were anchored in a backwater of the Mississippi River about 7 miles upstream of the confluence with the Missouri River in the Riverlands Migratory Bird Sanctuary. Conspecific attraction devices (tern decoys and a tern call box) were placed on the barge to attract these colony nesters to the structure. During that first experimental year 19 hatchlings were recorded.

2

Future:

The Interior Least Tern has been proposed for delisting by the USFWS. USACE's Mississippi Valley, Southwest, and Northwest divisions all have made formal post-delisting monitoring and conservation commitments that encompass about 85% of tern breeding populations.

Climate scientist predict significant changes in weather patterns across the country over the next few decades, couple with increase demands for water across the terns range, will present future challenges to species conservation.



Source: Map provided by Ashleigh Boss, ORISE Fellowship, Institute for Water Resources

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