

INTERIOR LEAST TERN

Endangered Species

Quick Stats:

Adult Length - 8 to 10 inches

Adult Wingspan - 20 inches

Identification: The Interior Least Tern is light grey on top and white on the bottom of its body. Its head has a black cap and black streaks going down the neck and both eyes with a white patch on the forehead. The beak is yellow with a dark tip.

Habitat: These birds live on bare shoreline along lakes, reservoirs, and rivers such as the Missouri River. They prefer sandy locations such as river sand or gravel bars.

Reproduction: Interior Least Terns breed from April to August in small colonies. They create shallow depressions in the sand to lay 2 to 3 eggs and then incubate them for around a month.

Diet: They hunt by hovering over and diving into shallow waters to catch small fish, crustaceans and insects.

Adaptations: While they are all hatched along the banks and shores of US waterways and oceans, Interior Least Terns do migrate, and spend the winters along the Central and South American coast, from Venezuela to northern Brazil.

Reasons for Endangered Status: Facing threats of habitat loss or degradation, Interior Least Terns have struggled to maintain their population throughout the United States. Man-made dams placed throughout the Missouri River reduce the occurrence of natural flooding. Natural flooding is beneficial for the Interior Least Tern because it creates new sandbar habitat and scours vegetation from existing sandbars. Because their primary breeding nesting habitat is located on river sandbars and along lake and reservoir



Interior Least Terns benefit from natural flooding because it creates new sandbars for them to rest on.

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shorelines, they are vulnerable to increasing river discharge flooding their nests. Hydro-electric dams on the Missouri River discharge water during the the energy generation process, so water levels will fluctuate based off of the activity of the dam that divides the water body.

Other threats include predators eating eggs and chicks if sandbars become vegetated and nest disturbance from recreational activities.

Pollution in the Missouri River may reduce prey populations and contribute to what is known as bioaccumulation. Bioaccumulation occurs when one animal eats another animal and the pollutants that had been absorbed by the animal that was eaten are now transmitted into the animal that did the eating. This continues to compound as the eating animal is then eaten by a larger animal, and so on. For example, when an Interior Least Tern catches a fish, the waterborne pollutants that had been in the fish are now going to be transmitted into the tern in a more concentrated form. This can be bad for a tern's long-term health, and pollutants may only further accumulate as the bird continues to hunt.

Due to habitat protection and enhancement, Interior Least Tern numbers have increased substantially since they were listed, especially along the Lower Mississippi River. A 2013 status review recommended they be delisted, contingent on sustained monitoring to ensure population trends are sustainable over time and on development of agreements with federal river-management agencies to continue current conservation measures to support their recovery.

Sources:

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For More Information: This is issue number 1 in volume I of issues all related to the Missouri River. To access the rest of the collection, visit the Missouri River Relief Education page at riverrelief.org. This issue was published in June 2018.