



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Endangered and Threatened Species

Interior Least Tern

Sterna antillarum



States in which interior least terns are known to nest. The birds nest along river systems. (There are other least tern populations that nest along the Atlantic, Gulf, and California coasts.)



The interior population of the least tern (interior least tern) is an endangered species. Endangered species are animals and plants that are in danger of becoming extinct. *Threatened species* are animals and plants that are likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future. Identifying, protecting, and restoring endangered and threatened species is the primary objective of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's endangered species program.

What is the Interior Least Tern?

Appearance - These 8 to 9 inch birds have a black "crown" on their head, a snowy white underside and forehead, grayish back and wings, orange legs, and a yellow bill with a black tip.

Habitat - From late April to August, terns use barren to sparsely vegetated sandbars along rivers, sand and gravel pits, or lake and reservoir shorelines.

Reproduction - The terns nest in a shallow hole scraped in an open sandy area, gravelly patch, or exposed flat. They nest in small colonies. The chicks leave the nest only a few days after hatching, but the adults continue to care for them, leading them to shelter in nearby grasses and bringing them food.

Feeding Habits - The terns hover over and dive into standing or flowing water to catch small fish.

Range - Interior least terns breed in isolated areas along the Missouri, Mississippi, Ohio, Red, and Rio Grande river systems. Their winter home is not known, but probably includes coastal areas of Central and South America.

Why is the Interior Least Tern Endangered?

Habitat Loss or Degradation - Dams, reservoirs, and other changes to river systems have eliminated most historic least tern habitat. The wide channels dotted with sandbars that are preferred by the terns have been replaced by narrow forested river corridors.

Nest Disturbance - Recreational activities on rivers and sandbars disturb the nesting terns, causing them to abandon their nests.

What Is Being Done to Prevent Extinction of the Interior Least Tern?

Listing - The interior least tern was listed as an endangered species in 1985.

Recovery Plan - The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service developed a recovery plan that describes actions needed to help the tern survive.

Research - Additional information is being gathered on the population status of the bird and habitat it prefers.

Habitat Protection - The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and other agencies review proposed changes in river flow or new reservoirs and the effects those changes may have on tern nesting areas.

Public Education - Public education programs have been developed to raise awareness of the tern's plight.

What Can I Do to Help Prevent the Extinction of Species?

Learn - Learn more about the interior least tern and other endangered and threatened species. Understand how the destruction of habitat leads to loss of endangered and threatened species and our nation's plant and animal diversity. Tell others about what you have learned.

Join - Join a conservation group; many have local chapters.

Volunteer - Volunteer at a local nature center, zoo, or wildlife refuge.