

Least Terns



Photo courtesy of ND Game and Fish Department

Scientific Name: *Sterna antillarum*

Description: At just nine inches in length, least terns are the smallest members of the gull and tern family. Least terns are mainly gray and white, they have a gray back, a forked gray tail and a white underside and narrow, pointed gray wings. They have a black cap, short white eye stripe, yellow bill with a black tip.

Preferred Habitat: In North Dakota, least terns are found exclusively on the Missouri River system. Suitable nesting habitat is sparsely vegetated with sand or gravel substrate and located near an adequate food supply.

Diet: The primary food source of least terns is small fish. Least terns catch fish by hovering and peering downward, when a fish is spotted they dive dramatically to catch the fish in their beaks.

Life History: In North Dakota, least terns breed from May to August. They lay two to three spotted, buff colored eggs in their nest. Their nest is a shallow scrape in the sand. The shallow nest combined with the sand-like coloring of the eggs makes them very hard to see in the sand. The eggs are incubated from 20 to 22 days before they hatch. The chicks are fed small minnow-like fish until they are able to fly around 20 days old. Because of the difficulty of diving for fish, newly fledged chicks are unable to feed themselves sufficiently and are fed for several more weeks. In North Dakota, least terns form loose colonies of 3 to 30 pairs. The terns leave the area in August and migrate to the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean for winter. Least terns typically live one to five years.

Reason for Decline: Least terns have declined in number due to the construction of dams on the Missouri River. The dams alter the natural hydrologic patterns and cause unnatural water fluctuations that can cause nests be washed away. The dams also reduce tern habitat. Flooding prevents the scouring of islands and shores, allowing vegetation to grow, making the area unsuitable for least terns. Damming has also created lakes that cover natural river corridors that once contained sandbar habitat required by least terns. Although not as prevalent in North Dakota, in some areas development along the rivers has also contributed to declines in least tern numbers. Another contributing factor is disturbance from human activities such as foot traffic, unleashed pets and off-road vehicles, these disturbances can cause temporary nest abandonment which exposes the eggs and chicks to predation and changes in internal temperature.