INTERIOR LEAST TERN (*Sterna antillarum athalassos)*

Description
Interior least terns are the smallest American terns. Sexes are alike, characterized by a black-capped crown, white forehead, grayish back and dorsal wing surfaces, orange legs, and an orange to yellow bill. Measuring about 8 inches long with a 20-inch wingspan, they resemble a gull in flight except for their smaller size and forked tail. Food consists of worms, fly larvae, beetles, crustaceans, mollusks, and other invertebrates.

Distribution
Interior least terns breed in Mississippi and Rio Grande River basins from Montana to Texas and from Eastern New Mexico and Colorado to Indiana and Louisiana. In Nebraska, their nesting areas are associated with major rivers, including the Missouri, Platte, Loup, and Niobrara rivers. The terns usually reach these nesting areas by mid-April and remain through August.

Habitat
Nesting interior least terns require sandbars free of vegetation and away from disturbance by humans and predators. Open shorelines are preferred; they will also use mud flats, salt flats, and sand and gravel pits along rivers. Terns build their nests in the middle of open areas. Both the eggs and chicks are well camouflaged. They catch and eat small fish by diving into the water.

Status
Global: T2-Imperiled. Federally Endangered. State Endangered. Nebraska: S2-Imperiled.
Interior populations of the Least Tern, formerly well distributed in the Mississippi Basin, now survive only in scattered remnants. Threats to the survival of the interior least tern include the actual and functional loss of sandbar habitat. Low spring water levels fail to wash invading vegetation from the sandbars making them unsuitable for nesting. Low water during the nesting period also makes sandbars more accessible causing the terns to be vulnerable to human, pet, livestock, and predator disturbance. Habitat has been decimated by extensive water management projects and increased use of beaches and sandbars. Untimely water releases from dams and diversion return flows often inundate sandbars, eggs, and chicks during the nesting season.

Management
The preservation of suitable habitat is the key to survival of interior least terns. Areas where they are found, as well as potential areas, need to be protected by limiting access by humans and other disturbances. Water level management to prevent predator access, sandbar invasion by woody plants and untimely flooding is also important.

More Information
http://www.ngpc.state.ne.us/wildlife/ltern.asp