



WILDLIFE NOTES

Least tern

Sterna antillarum

Distinguishing Features

The least tern seldom swims, spends much of its time on the wing and nests in colonies. This water birds flight is light, swift and graceful, and is the major means of allowing it to snatch fish, crustaceans, and insect food from the water's surface, almost without missing a beat. These birds are highly aerial members of the gull family, with slender bodies, long wings, and sharp, fairly long bills. This bird is smaller than other terns, and it has a yellow bill with a blackish tip; other terns are larger, with red or black bills.

During breeding, the least tern has a white forehead. Juveniles and immatures are smaller and more difficult to identify.

In New Mexico, the least tern

was first recorded nesting at Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge in 1949, and since then it has been present annually.

Descriptive Details

The adult plumage is mostly white, with the back and upper surface of the wings gray, and the cap and outermost primary feathers are black. The young tern's plumage is similar, but the crown is gray, and there is more black in the wings (including on the primary feathers and the leading edge of the upper surface.) The juvenile plumage resembles that of the immature, but the gray color is duller. The iris is brown, and the feet are yellow in adults and juveniles and black in immatures. Adult wings measure up to seven inches in length in males and 6 2/3 inches in females; tails measure three to 3 1/2 inches in length.

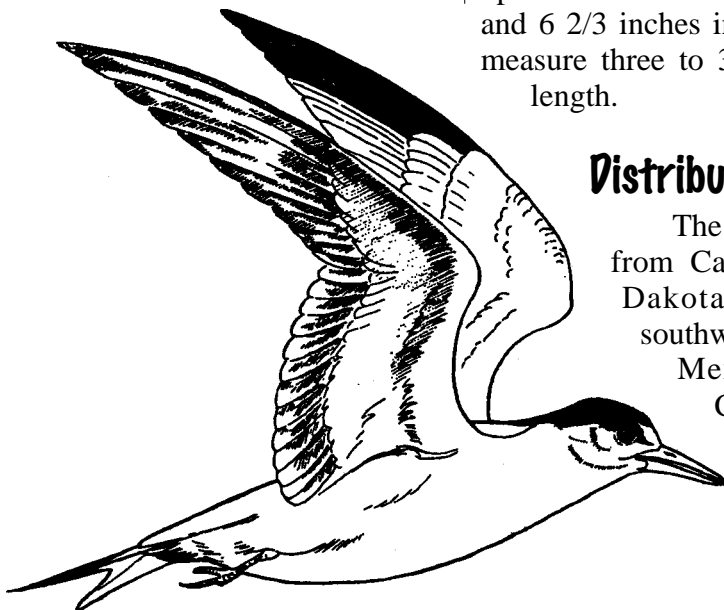
Distribution

The least tern breeds from California, South Dakota and Maine southward to Chiapas, Mexico, and the Caribbean, with the major inland population in the Mississippi Basin. This

bird winters from the Pacific Coast of Mexico and the U.S. Gulf Coast southward. In New Mexico, lest terns breed in the vicinity of Roswell, including regularly at Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge, which is this bird's habitat area in the state. They rarely breed at Bottomless Lake State Park and Wade's Bog. The least tern is found in migration in Eddy County and as a vagrant elsewhere, including Espanola, Sumner Lake (DeBaca County), Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge (Socorro County), near Glenwood, Las Cruces and Alamogordo.

Biology

The least tern nests on the ground, typically in areas that are sandy and relatively free of vegetation, such as sandbars in rivers, beaches, and spits in coastal areas. In New Mexico, and other parts of the southern Great Plains, alkali flats are selected as nesting areas. The nest is a shallow scrape, in which the eggs are laid. These are buff with irregular dark splotches and dots, and they average 1 1/2 inches in length. Seven clutches that were observed at Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge ranged from one to three eggs, with the average being two. The calls of the lest tern include various kittering notes, a sharp "kit" and a harsh "zree-eek" or "zeek."



Status

As nesting areas for the least tern has been degraded, its range and numbers have declined. As a result, both the inland subspecies and the Pacific Coast subspecies have been listed as endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Population counts over the period have been quite variable, ranging as high as 60 birds in 1961 but usually 20 to 30. During the period between 1965 and 1974 the count averaged 21.4 birds, but they declined to 9.2 between 1975 and 1984. In 1986, four adult pairs fledged a total of two young, while in 1987 only three adult pairs were present – each

fledging two young. In 1986 and 1987, the terns nested off the refuge on lands controlled by the City of Roswell, where human disturbance, nest flooding, environmental contamination, and predation were problems.

Conservation

Proper breeding conditions are essential, along with an adequate prey base and relative freedom from predators and humans. Improvements should be considered to improve habitat availability.

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Conservation Education Section
Department of Game and Fish
PO Box 25112
Santa Fe, NM 87504
(505) 476-8119**

