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ENDANGERED SPECIES

'Small, scrappy bird' is heralded as ESA success story

Michael Doyle, E&E News reporter

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The Fish and Wildlife Service is removing the interior least tern from the endangered species list. Dan Pancamo/Wikimedia Commons

The interior least tern made the most of the Endangered Species Act and thereby dodged an extinction threat, the Fish and Wildlife Service announced today.

Capping years of work, the agency declared the bird will be removed from the list of threatened and endangered species.

"Dozens of states, federal agencies, tribes, businesses and conservation groups have worked tirelessly over the course of three decades to successfully recover these birds," Fish and Wildlife Service Director Aurelia Skipwith said in a **statement**.

The bird is the tiniest member of the gull and tern family, reaching between 8 and 9 inches in length, with a 22-inch wingspan.

Geography separates the interior least tern from the eastern least tern and the California least tern.

The interior least tern nests next to major rivers of the Great Plains and Lower Mississippi Valley. The Fish and Wildlife Service added it to the ESA list in 1985, citing its diminished population and scattered distribution and threats to its breeding habitat.

"Reservoirs had inundated hundreds of miles of historical or potential tern riverine habitat in many Mississippi River Basin drainages, and reduced sediment input into channels below dams had caused channel degradation, constriction, and loss of potential nesting habitats," FWS recounted.

The species has since demonstrated what FWS termed a "positive population trend," increasing by almost 10 times what it was when originally listed. A 2005 survey found over 17,500 adult birds forming 489 colonies in 68 distinct geographic sites.

Interior least terns currently nest along more than 2,858 miles of river channels across the Great Plains and the Lower Mississippi Valley, with nesting colonies found in 18 states.

By the time of a 2013 status review, the agency had concluded that the fish-gobbling species had recovered, though it took six more years before the October 2019 proposal of a formal delisting and the commencement of a 60-day public comment period (**Greenwire**, Oct. 23, 2019).

Underscoring the lack of controversy, only 25 public comments were posted, with one anonymous individual declaring the delisting is "supported by much empirical data, revealing the species revitalization throughout the United States."

Among other efforts, officials credit conservation partnerships that have developed programs that restrict habitat access, control predators and vegetation, and conduct monitoring during nesting season.

"This small, scrappy bird has struggled to survive for so long, and thanks to the strong protections of the Endangered Species Act, it's been brought back from the brink of extinction," said Stephanie Kurose, a senior policy specialist at the Center for Biological Diversity.