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Bird often seen at Bitter Lake removed from endangered list

By

[Lisa Dunlap](#)

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The interior least tern, a small migratory bird seen at Bitter Lake during the spring and summer, has recovered from its endangered status, according to federal officials. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. (Submitted Photo)

A bird species typically seen at Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge in the spring and summer and known to inhabit the Midwest and South has been taken off the federal endangered species list.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Tuesday that it plans to publish a final rule Wednesday to remove the interior least tern, also known as the interior populations of least tern, from the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife. Scientists and policy-makers have determined that the birds' population numbers have recovered and threats to its habitats have diminished.

The rule is due to become effective 30 days after publication.

The interior least tern is a small migratory bird that typically lives near rivers, lakes and wetlands. It has been on the federal endangered list since May 1985. Biologists estimated that there were only 2,000 adult birds in existence along the Mississippi River and its tributaries, according to a Fish and Wildlife Service website.

"At the time of listing, the interior least tern was believed to have been eliminated from much of this summer nesting range by the construction of dams or other forms of river engineering, such as channelization that inundated and destroyed their nesting islands and bars and altered flow regimes," the website indicates.

Now there are about 18,000 birds living in a much larger area of the United States, including Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas,

Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi.

During the winters, the birds migrate to Central and South American and the Caribbean.

According to the Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency participated with more than 30 groups to monitor the bird, protect and conserve its habitats, and lessen threats from predators.

"Protecting these birds not only saved them from extinction but also helped us manage the surrounding ecosystem better," said Stephanie Kurose, a senior policy specialist with the Center for Biological Diversity. "Restoring the tern's river habitat to more closely mimic natural flows improved river health and benefited many other species that call those same places home. The service should continue this important work to improve the health of all rivers across the country."

A manager with Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge, located just northeast of Roswell, said that the least tern naturally migrated to Bitter Lake for several reasons, including that its water pools are not kept full but allowed to evaporate, which exposes land barriers that the bird can use. Jennifer Romero, assistant refuge manager, said that the bird also likes the salty soil of the area.

"We will still be managing our water and our wildlife the same," she said. "It won't change because of this action."