

SPECIES PROFILE

Least Tern

Sterna antillarum

Federal Listing: Not listed

State Listing: Endangered

Global Rank: G4

State Rank: SHB

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ELEMENT 1: DISTRIBUTION AND HABITAT

1.1 Habitat Description

Least terns use open beaches and vegetation-free islands for nesting. Although they may nest in areas with a substrate of larger stones, they prefer sand, shell, or gravel substrates high above the tide line. Like other terns, least terns tend to nest in colonies and are most productive at locations where colonies have been successful in previous years (Thompson et al. 1997). Unlike other terns, least terns tend to nest in areas attached to the mainland (Kress and Hall 2004).

1.2 Justification

Least terns, whose nesting colonies are sensitive to disturbance, are declining in number in some areas of their range (NatureServe 2005). In New Hampshire, the least tern is listed as endangered due to the absence of a breeding pair and the loss of nesting habitat due to anthropogenic factors.

Development along the Atlantic coast has resulted in significant habitat loss and degradation (United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) 1985), and New Hampshire Bird Records indicate that least terns have been rare and non-breeding in the state since 1980. The combined pressures of development and increased human recreation have in some areas caused least terns to abandon their natural habitats and nest on flat, gravel rooftops (Thompson et al. 1997, Kress

and Hall 2004).

Although North American Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) data indicate a significant decline of least terns in North America between 1978 and 1988, populations were stable or increasing from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s. This increase may have been the result of improved and expanded monitoring efforts during this period, especially along the Atlantic coast from Virginia to Maine (USFWS 1987).

1.3 Protection and Regulatory Status

New Hampshire RSA 212-A:6 IV(a) Endangered Species Conservation Act
Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918
BCR 30 priority bird species (Highest concern)
PIF (physiographic area 28) priority bird species

1.4 Population and Habitat Distribution

Few records exist of least terns nesting in New Hampshire. Terns fed in Portsmouth in 1932 and the New Hampshire Audubon recorded 2 to 10 pairs nesting in Seabrook from 1953 to 1960. New Hampshire Bird Records indicate that least terns have been rare and non-breeding in the state since 1980. Although least terns are common in many parts of their range in North America, their preferred nesting habitat is also prime coastal real estate prone to development and human recreation (Thompson et al. 1997).

1.5 Town Distribution Map

Not completed for this species.

1.6 Habitat Map

See coastal sand dune systems.

1.7 Sources of Information

Information on least tern habitat, population distribution and status was collected from literature, New Hampshire Fish and Game data, Tern Management Plans and Partners in Flight and the internet.

1.8 Extent and Quality of Data

Although least terns have been much studied throughout their breeding range, and although data regarding their biology and behavior is extensive, little is known about their demography and associations between wintering areas and breeding populations. Locally, the extent and quality of data on the distribution of the species is limited.

1.9 Distribution Research

Globally, more research is needed to understand the species' use of associated breeding and wintering areas, evaluate the success of management practices, identify the species' behavioral and demographic responses to humans and other animals (both domestic and wild), identify contaminant threats, and obtain better estimates of the species' demographics.

Locally, consistent survey and monitoring efforts would provide data on the current distribution and abundance of the species in the state. Along with more research, management of remaining habitat is necessary if least terns are to breed again along the New Hampshire coast.

America, No. 290, A. Poole and F. Gill, editors. The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, PA, and The American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.

United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants: Determination of endangered and threatened status for the piping plover: Final rule. Federal Register 50 (238): 50726-50734.

United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Office of Migratory Bird Management. 1987. Migratory nongame birds of management concern in the United States: the 1987 list.

ELEMENT 5: REFERENCES

5.1 Literature Cited

Kress, S.W., and C.S. Hall. 2004. Tern Management Handbook: Coastal Northeastern United States and Atlantic Canada. National Audubon Society. Ithaca, New York, USA.

NatureServe. 2005. NatureServe Explorer: An online encyclopedia of life (web application). Version 4.2 NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia. <<http://www.natureserve.org/explorer>> Accessed 16 February 2005.

Thompson, B.C., J.A. Jackson, J. Burger, L.A. Hill, E.M. Kirsch, and J.L. Atwood. 1997. Least Tern (*Sterna antillarum*). In The Birds of North