

LEAST TERN

Sterna antillarum (Endangered Colorado, Federally)



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AT ONLY 9 INCHES IN LENGTH, the tern is the smallest of the North American terns. During the breeding season the adults are light gray on the upper parts, white underneath, with a black crown above the eyes, a white mark on the forehead. Unlike other terns that occur in Colorado, the legs and bill are yellow and the forked tail is relatively short. When feeding, least terns dive from as high as 20 feet into the water to capture small fish.

Least terns have bred in southeastern Colorado, generally in the La Junta-Lamar area. The preferred nesting habitat is on sandy or pebbly beaches or islands, well above the water line, around playas,

lakes and reservoirs. Two eggs are normally deposited in a shallow "scrape," their coloration providing excellent camouflage.

During the 1800s, the eastern coastal population of least terns was dramatically reduced as the birds were killed for their wings and feathers for the millinery trade. The population rebounded after receiving protection. Now, the population is declining because of disturbance during the nesting season. Human recreational activities along beaches can cause these birds to abandon nesting activities, even after eggs have been laid. Another cause of nesting disruption is extreme water fluctuations during the nesting season in manmade lakes.