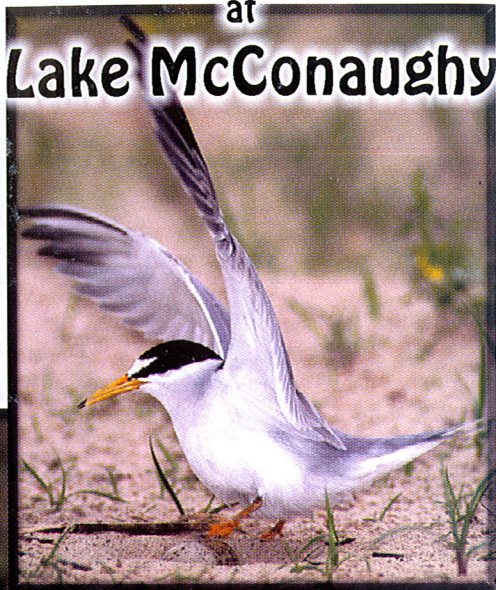


Least Terns & Piping Plovers at Lake McConaughy



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Piping plover



The Interior Least Tern, the smallest member of the gull family, and the **Piping Plover**, one of the smallest members of the plover family, are two species of birds that share the beaches of Lake McConaughy and sand bars of the Platte River in Nebraska with hikers, campers, air boaters, swimmers, picnickers and other outdoor enthusiasts. They are also designated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Nebraska Game and Parks Commission as threatened (plover) and endangered (tern) species.

Both species nest on the sandy beaches of Lake McConaughy, Nebraska's largest reservoir.

To ensure that these birds have the chance to recover and thrive in Nebraska, efforts are underway to understand their habitat needs and how people can improve the birds' nesting success. Public education and cooperation

provide the most effective and positive impact upon these two species and upon all wildlife in Nebraska.

Interior Least Tern
(*Sternula antillarum*
athalassos)

The interior least tern is a small (8 – 9 inches long) pale gray-white bird with black outer wing tips and yellow legs and bill. The tail is slightly forked and the head has a black cap over a white forehead with black eye stripes.

Terns fly with rapid wing beats and often hover. While searching the water for prey, terns will suddenly plunge into the water to capture small fish, thus the nickname "Little Striker." Although terns dive into the water for fish, they rarely swim, while gulls -- terns' close relatives -- swim but rarely dive.

Immature (less than two years old) interior least terns have white heads and bellies with brownish backs and upper wings. The fork in the tail is less evident than that of the adult. Immature terns may be seen flying over the beaches of Lake McConaughy during late July and early August before migrating to wintering grounds along the coast of Latin America.

Piping Plover
(*Charadrius melodus*)

The piping plover is a small (5 – 6 inches long) sand-colored bird with a white breast and a

single dark ring around the throat. Smaller than a robin, the piping plover has orange legs and an orange bill with a black tip. The piping plover is often confused with the slightly larger killdeer, which is distinguished by the two dark rings around its throat and its strident "killdeer" call. Piping plovers are difficult to see against the gravel and sand of the beach, so often the easiest way to locate the bird is by its plaintive "peep-lo" whistle.

Another way to identify the plover is by its "broken-wing" act. With one wing outstretched, the parent plover will hobble away from its nest as though injured, presenting the appearance of easy prey to a predator. However, as the intruder nears, the plover suddenly "recovers" and escapes. The birds perform the act to draw intruders away from their chicks or eggs.

Piping plovers feed on invertebrates found in the moist sand along the shoreline.

Nesting

Both the interior least tern and piping plover nest in shallow scrapes in the sand, laying tan, speckled eggs in the nest. Terns typically lay up to three eggs and plovers up to four eggs. The two species often share the same nesting areas.

While piping plovers usually nest solitarily, interior least terns typically nest in colonies. Adult terns will protect the area by diving at intruders and dropping

excrement on those that get too close to the nests.

Both birds are opportunistic nest-builders, which enables them to respond to changes in habitat. The birds typically return to the same area each year, but if the habitat has changed, they will shift to other areas. If their nests are destroyed or disturbed early in the nesting season, the birds will usually relocate and re-nest. Piping plovers normally lay their eggs in early to mid-May, while terns usually nest from late May through early June. Nesting may extend into midsummer for both species if their first nests are destroyed.

Interior least terns incubate their eggs for about three weeks. The young are able to run quite well within a few days after hatching. After about three weeks, the young fledge -- that is, they are able to fly. The chicks are fed and protected by their parents until migration.

Piping plovers incubate their eggs for about



Least tern

four weeks. The young birds are precocial (covered with down and fully active when hatched) and are able to run and feed themselves within several hours of hatching. Plover chicks fledge at about four weeks.

Terns and plovers have a life-span of about ten years, which helps the species offset occasional years of low productivity.

Threats to Nesting Success

Loss of open, vegetation free sandy areas is considered the major reason for these birds' threatened existence throughout North America. Both species will make use of natural and man-made river sandbars and spoil piles at sand and gravel operations, as well as the beaches of lakes and reservoirs.

Nest failures during incubation and chick loss before fledging are two major factors limiting the growth of both species' population. In Nebraska, predation, severe weather and, in some cases, direct human disturbance are the main causes of nest and chick loss.

Of these threats, human disturbance is the most manageable problem. Lake McConaughy and the Platte River are sites for a variety of recreational activities. Unfortunately, the areas that people use for recreation are often the same areas used by terns and plovers for nesting.

Of particular concern is the use of off-road recreational vehicles. The speed at which these vehicles travel and the amount of area which they can cover increases the danger of disturbing or destroying tern and plover nests,

eggs and chicks.

To prevent the destruction of nesting sites at Lake McConaughy, beaches, off-river sandpits and river sandbars are marked with signs to alert the public to the presence of nests. Additionally, specific areas at Lake McConaughy are reserved for these birds. Signs alerting beach users to the birds' presence are posted throughout the recreation area and other areas are fenced off.

Another concern is domestic dogs. Pets brought to the beaches of Lake McConaughy and allowed to run free are a direct threat to the eggs and the young chicks that are feeding along the shore. They are also in violation of Nebraska Game and Parks Commission regulations which specify that all pets are to be on a leash at all times.

It is impossible to mark all of the nesting sites, but regardless of whether or not the areas are marked with signs, disturbance of an endangered species is a violation of state and federal laws and is punishable by a fine, a jail sentence, impoundment of a free running pet, and forfeiture of any vehicles used in disturbing a nest. The best action to take upon discovering a nest site is to avoid it completely!

The Future

Optimum conditions for tern and plover nesting come and go. Production of terns and plovers in Nebraska varies considerably from year to year. This is a natural occurrence because of the often unforgiving nature of Nebraska's weather -- floods, heat, wind,

hail -- as well as the impact of predators and people.

But today, despite the many dangers facing the birds, their future is brighter. With continued research and habitat protection and restoration (as Central has done at Lake McConaughy and sites along the Platte River) and with work being done by other utilities and private conservation groups, progress is being made toward securing a future for these birds. But much remains to be done.

The future of these species lies in your hands. Understanding of the birds and their habitat is the most effective way to ensure their survival in Nebraska.



Least tern and piping plover nests are simply shallow scrapes in the sand surrounded by a few pebbles. The nests, like the piping plover nest pictured above, often escape notice, so people should exercise caution when visiting Lake McConaughy's beaches.