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Missouri River Recovery Program: Least Tern and Piping Plover: Endangered & Threatened Species

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Why they are in trouble
In the days before Missouri River flows were regulated, annual spring flooding would clear existing sandbars of vegetation and create new sandbars that would provide habitat for the terns and plovers during their breeding season. When the river flows became regulated by dams, this process of creating breeding habitat was diminished. Even though the Corps is extremely careful in its regulation of the flows, the potential for causing losses to the populations of these two bird species increases as the amount of habitat decreases.

Maintaining a healthy Missouri River, including protecting species that live along the river, is a top priority for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The least tern and piping plover are shorebirds that use the Missouri River for breeding habitat. In 1985 the least tern was listed as endangered, and the piping plover as threatened, within the Missouri River basin. Today, the Corps’ conservation efforts are helping the recovery of these species.

While both birds nest elsewhere, the sandbars of the Missouri River and reservoir shorelines are important to their survival. In fact, in 2002 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designated areas along much of the Missouri River as critical habitat for the piping plover.

Sandbars along the river provide especially good habitat because their sandy, barren nature provides ideal nesting and feeding habitat. While both birds are known to fiercely protect their young, the best protection for tern and plover eggs and chicks is their natural coloration, which blends into the sandy backgrounds. The sandbars provide food for plover chicks that forage along the shorelines. Least tern chicks are fed fish caught by their parents in the shallow water surrounding the sandbars.

It is now time to protect the least tern and piping plover by maintaining and creating more sandbars for the birds as we continue to use the river for other purposes.
SAVING TERNs AND PLOVERS

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recommends that the Corps build between 20 and 80 acres of emergent sandbar habitat per river mile along most of the river between Garrison Dam in North Dakota and Sioux City, Iowa. Downstream from Sioux City, the river has been channelized for navigation and bank stabilization, and appropriate habitat is essentially nonexistent. Lesser amounts of emergent sandbar habitat are required downstream from Fort Peck Dam in Montana.

The Corps established the Emergent Sandbar Habitat Program to develop and maintain tern and plover habitat along the river. Sandbars are created, enhanced or maintained in one of three ways:

• Building up an area using dredge material from other parts of the river
• Clearing off vegetation before the arrival of the terns and plovers
• Modifying flow levels at upstream dams has the potential to create sandbar habitat.

Emergent sandbar habitat development is planned to avoid, to the extent possible, residential areas, marinas, municipal intakes, other areas with high concentrations of recreational boating, and environmentally and culturally sensitive areas. Once habitat is created, the Corps posts restriction signs warning people to keep off sandbars during active nesting periods.

The Corps has also partnered with Tribes, non-governmental agencies, universities and state and federal agencies to increase monitoring and conservation efforts along the Missouri River from Fort Peck, Montana, to Sioux City, Iowa.

Among other benefits, monitoring least terns and piping plovers allows the Corps to obtain accurate population numbers and trends, identify key habitat and determine threats posed by habitat degradation, predators and humans. All of this information is critical to protecting these species and eventually removing them from the Endangered Species List.