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**SURVEY FOR LEAST TERNS AND OTHER BIRDS ON THE
NORTH AND SOUTH PLATTE RIVERS, EASTERN KEITH COUNTY**

The Interior Least Tern (*Sterna antillarum athalassos*) is considered a nationally endangered subspecies, and except for a sighting of this form on Lake McConaughy during the summer of 1977 by Fretwell (Rosche and Johnsgard, 1984) and a more recent sighting of a pair with an unfledged chick between Arthur and Martin bays of Lake McConaughy in 1989 (Czaplewski, 1989), there have been no other published records of this species in Keith County.

Because of a chance sighting on 20 May 1990, of two Least Terns flying along the South Platte River as I was crossing a bridge near Roscoe on my way to Cedar Point Biological Station (near Kingsley Dam), I decided to under-

take a survey of the North and South Platte Rivers in that vicinity, with the aid of my ornithology class. Six students (Tim Cramer, Andy Didrichsons, Steve Lamphere, Misti MacDowell, Ue Thao and Carol Thompson) undertook a detailed survey of the North Platte River from the bridge just south of Keystone to the Union Pacific railway bridge five miles northwest of Paxton, a river distance of ten miles. This section of river was surveyed three times by them between 25 May and 28 May 1990, on foot, and with canoe and boat. Additionally, the 2.5-mile section from the railroad bridge to the highway bridge over the North Platte directly north of Paxton was surveyed once by this same group of students, and the two-mile section of river from the diversion dam feeding the Sutherland canal at the east end of Keystone lake to the Keystone bridge was surveyed once by the entire ornithology class (19 persons) on 31 May. Results of counts of these two shorter sections are not included in the later species listing.

Secondly, an 8-mile stretch of the South Platte from the highway bridge just southeast of Roscoe eastward to a point 2.5 miles east of the diversion dam feeding the South Platte River supply canal was surveyed on foot by the entire ornithology class on 1 June 1990. A more cursory survey was made along a three-mile stretch to the west of the Roscoe bridge. Results of bird counts in this latter section are also not included in the summary listing.

With respect to the Least Tern, two adults were seen in flight on 27 May on the North Platte 2.5 miles east of Keystone, and two adults were seen in flight on the 31 May survey about halfway between Keystone Lake and the Keystone bridge. No evidence of breeding was apparent from their behavior. During the South Platte survey 11 Least Terns (ten in full breeding plumage) were observed feeding just above the South Platte feeder canal six miles east of the Roscoe bridge, and four more were sighted about one mile upstream from that point. No evidence of breeding, such as courtship feeding or other activity, was observed during the South Platte survey. In general, however, the habitat seemed to be locally suitable for breeding in spite of low water flows. Furthermore, small fish (*Notropus*, *Fundulus*, etc.) appeared to be considerably greater in abundance in the South Platte than the North Platte. I have since learned from Dr. John Janovy, Jr. of the University of Nebraska that in late June of 1983 he found a breeding colony of Least Terns on a sand bank on the north side of the South Platte River 1.5 miles east of the Roscoe bridge, with at least five active nests containing eggs or newly hatched chicks. He also showed me several color transparencies that confirmed this identification. He mentioned that during 1983 water flows in the South Platte were unusually high and that nesting occurred on a large gravel bank (associated with a sand and gravel operation) that was at the time surrounded by water.

During the period of study, almost no water was being released at the Lake Keystone diversion dam into the North Platte, and most of the water in the river seemed to be coming from Whitetail Creek and a few other creeks that similarly feed the river from the north side. At this time the FERC was holding in abeyance a federal order to release water into the North Platte in order to maintain flows for endangered species.

The threatened Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*) was also searched for, but without success. Although it was reportedly observed near Ogallala along

the South Platte in 1988 by one of my ornithology students (Mindy Schulz), I have in most years seen it only along Arthur Bay of Lake McConaughy, where a single pair has regularly attempted to nest near the lakeshore. However, heavy human use of the area, including unrestricted vehicular traffic in the immediate nesting area, often results in nest failure. This year a nest with four eggs was found at Arthur Bay on 7 June. Since I left the area the next day, I was unable to determine its fate.

Table 1. Birds seen during spring North and South Platte Surveys

Species	N. Platte (3 counts)	S. Platte (1 count)	Species	N. Platte (3 counts)	S. Platte (1 count)
American White Pelican	1-1-1	-	Great Horned Owl	-	1
Double-crested Cormorant	28-11-10	-	Common Nighthawk	0-0-1	1
Canada Goose	3-3-4	4 + 6 young	Chimney Swift	1-0-0	-
Wood Duck	-	2	Belted Kingfisher	3-0-4	5
Mallard	35-23-31	36	Red-headed Woodpecker	8-1-0	2+ nest
Northern Pintail	2-0-0	2	Northern Flicker	5-1-0	6+ nest
Blue-winged Teal	26-4-24	19	Western Kingbird	2-0-1	17
Northern Shoveler	0-0-2	7	Eastern Kingbird	7-20-7	23
Gadwall	2-0-0	2	Rough-winged Swallow	45-0-1	1
American Wigeon	0-0-1	2	Cliff Swallow	53-10-1	ca. 200
Lesser Scaup	2-0-0	-	Barn Swallow	1-0-2	3
Common Merganser	-	2	Blue Jay	4-0-0	2
Turkey Vulture	5-0-3	2	Black-billed Magpie	3-1-3	3
Swainson's Hawk	0-2-0	2	American Crow	0-1-0	3
Red-tailed Hawk	3-0-4	5	House Wren	3-10-0	12
Prairie Falcon	-	1	Marsh Wren	1-1-0	-
American Kestrel	1-0-0	1	American Robin	5-0-1	16
Ring-necked Pheasant	3-0-0	-	Brown Thrasher	6-2-1	2
Sharp-tailed Grouse	1-0-0	2	European Starling	1-0-0	1
Northern Bobwhite	2-0-0	2	Warbling Vireo	-	2
Great Blue Heron	12-7-15	8	Yellow Warbler	0-1-1	-
Killdeer	44-28-22	49	Common Yellowthroat	4-3-2	2
Solitary Sandpiper	-	2	Rufous-sided Towhee	1-0-0	-
Spotted Sandpiper	45-11-7	5	Lark Bunting	1-0-0	-
Long-billed Curlew	1-7-6	-	Field Sparrow	0-2-0	-
Stilt Sandpiper	0-2-0	-	Red-winged Blackbird	12-7-7	66
<i>Calidris</i> Sandpipers	950-0-0	37	Western Meadowlark	5-6-1	2
Long-billed Dowitcher	4-0-0	-	Common Grackle	23-4-3	31
Wilson's Phalarope	28-6-9	-	Brown-headed Cowbird	3-0-0	1
Common Tern	2-0-3	5	Orchard Oriole	4-0-1	12
Forster's Tern	1-0-0	7	Northern Oriole	4-0-1	1
Least Tern	0-2-0	15	American Goldfinch	2-0-1	-
Black Tern	0-0-1	-			
Rock Dove	1-0-0	12			
Mourning Dove	17-11-6	21			

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