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Least tern

In Nebraska, Thirty Years of Success

For more than 30 years, the Endangered Species Act has helped prevent the extinction of our national treasures. Because of the act, beloved symbols of America such as the bald eagle and the peregrine falcon are thriving, and rare species such as the American burying beetle and the least tern are recovering in our prairie lands and wetlands due to habitat conservation efforts.

Only nine of the 1,800 species protected by the act have been declared extinct since its passage in 1973. Such an astonishing success rate makes the act a true symbol of our nation's commitment to protecting our natural heritage for future generations. It is also an example of the progress that can be made when communities work together to conserve their local wildlife and habitat. With the participation of communities, business and government, less than one percent of development projects reviewed under the act have been halted, proving that we can conserve wildlife without sacrificing progress. With the creation of jobs from tourism and outdoor recreation related to endangered species, it can truly be said that people all over Nebraska benefit from the act.

Nebraska currently has 13 endangered and threatened species (8 animals and 5 plants).

Least Tern

The first recorded observation of the least tern in Nebraska was along the Missouri River by the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804. In addition to the Missouri River, the historic breeding range of the least tern included most of Nebraska's Platte River system and about 100 miles of the lower Niobrara River. But when river impoundment, channelization and levee construction altered natural flow regimens, the bird's numbers rapidly declined. The interior population of least tern was listed as endangered in 1985.

Annual surveys to monitor least tern populations in Nebraska began in 1980. Today Nebraska supports one of the largest populations of least terns in the interior United States. Recent population information for least terns in Nebraska, including stretches of the Missouri River shared with South Dakota, suggests a total of 1,200 to 1,400 birds. Intensive research and comprehensive river management plans are underway, particularly along the Missouri and Platte Rivers, where development pressure is most threatening. As interactions between people and nesting least terns increase, efforts to heighten public awareness and minimize human disturbance also increase, including posting and delineating colonies with signs. It is hoped that with these measures the least tern will continue its recovery in Nebraska and ultimately be removed from the endangered species list.

Sandhill and Whooping Cranes

Swirling masses of cranes descend on south-central Nebraska each year, heralding the arrival of spring and the largest gathering of cranes in the world. The Platte River Valley becomes a six-week pit stop from late February to early April for a half million cranes journeying north to their Arctic breeding grounds. More than 500,000 Sandhill cranes—90 percent of the world population and one of the greatest concentrations of any animal on Earth—cover an 80-mile stretch of the Platte River. The endangered whooping crane also makes a stop on the river each year, adding to the spectacle.

Cranes and Nebraska have a relationship that has



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Sandhill cranes

lasted for more than nine million years. They once roosted and fed along 200 miles of the Platte River compared to today's 80-mile stretch—the minimum biologists believe necessary to sustain the birds' awesome migration. Dams, irrigation, development, and power plants have decreased the river's once powerful flow by 70 percent, allowing tree and shrub seedlings to grow over once prime roosting spots. Further, some 75 percent of the area's grasslands and nutrient-rich wet meadows near the Platte have been lost to agriculture and gravel mining. But even today, the

Sandhill crane chick



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arrival of the cranes is noted on the Nebraska calendar, and thousands of birders from across the country descend on the state for the event.

Economic Benefits of Protecting Wildlife and Habitat

Ecotourism represents a huge economic force in the country. Each year, millions of Americans travel and pay to view wildlife and take in all that nature has to offer. Much of this activity takes place on the hundreds of national wildlife refuges spread across the country. Nationwide, visits to wildlife refuges generated more than \$1.3 billion in income for local and state economies and an additional \$150 million in tax revenues. Indeed, national wildlife refuges received nearly twice as many visitors in 2004 than Grand Canyon, Yosemite, Yellowstone, Acadia, Grand Teton, and Statue of Liberty national parks combined. And the vast majority of those visitors came from outside the area, further testament to the ability of these special places to draw people and dollars to a region.

In Nebraska alone, Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge in the northern

part of the state generated \$4.9 million in economic activity for the local area, while the Boyer Chute National Wildlife Refuge in the eastern part of the state generated \$192,900. Moreover, a study conducted for the Environmental Protection Agency five years ago estimated that birders spend \$25 million to \$30 million each spring in central Nebraska during crane migration.

For more information on the success of the Endangered Species Act, please visit www.saveesa.org.



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