

Piping Plovers and Least Terns

Nesting Facts and Ground Cover Planting to Deter Nesting

This fact sheet presents information about Least Terns and Piping Plovers and what landowners can do to discourage them from nesting on their property.

Piping Plovers (*Charadrius melodus*) and Interior Least Terns (*Sterna antillarum athalassos*) are small water birds that nest on a sandy-gravelly substrate. Their natural nesting habitat in Nebraska is high, dry, and barren mid-stream sandbars within rivers. **Terns and plovers also nest on artificial substrate, mainly sand spoil piles produced as a byproduct of sand and gravel mining.**



Piping plovers (federally threatened species) lay 4 eggs that take about 25-30 days to hatch. Soon after hatching the chicks leave the nest and are able to feed themselves (worms, flies and other invertebrates along the shoreline). **Chicks are very mobile by about 3-5 days.** In approximately another 20-25 days, they are able to fly and may feed at the site for another week or two. *See Table 1 for approximate calendar dates.*

Least terns (federally endangered species) lay 3 eggs and hatch in about 22-28 days. The chicks are fed fish by the adult even after they learn to fly. **In the first few weeks the chicks move very little and tend to stay near the nest. Their defense at this age is to lie down and hide, making them vulnerable to machinery and human traffic/disturbance.** Like the plover chicks, they use camouflage as a defense and are very hard to see on the sand. In about 20-25 days they can fly and may stay at the site an extra week or two while they practice foraging for fish themselves. *See Table 1 for approximate calendar dates.*



The mission of the Tern and Plover Conservation Partnership is to study and protect Least Terns, Piping Plovers, and other birds within the Platte River System, Nebraska, in a manner that minimizes conflicts with private industry, and educates and involves local communities in this effort.

Nests and chicks are highly vulnerable to human disturbance. Even if a nest is not directly on your lot the adult birds will likely see you approaching, working, or recreating in the area and will leave their nest to mob and dive bomb you (in the case of the terns), or try to lead you away from the nest with a broken wing display (piping plovers). **If birds do not tend their nests it can delay hatching, and in cases of heat above 80 degrees, the eggs can overheat because of exposure, causing the nest to eventually fail.** It can also open the door for predators to destroy the nest. **If birds lose a nest (eggs) they will likely re-nest in another area on the site, starting the cycle over again.** This is another reason human disturbance is an issue.



Since these birds are federally protected by the Endangered Species Act, any harassment or destroying of a nest, chick, and/or adult will be investigated by the US Fish and Wildlife Service (not the Tern and Plover Conservation Partnership), and any actions/fines are handled by the USFWS according to the situation. **Our Partnership is voluntary and non-regulatory.** We strive to cooperate with contractors and developers prior to the nesting season to prevent the need for involvement by law enforcement.

Table 1. Estimate of extreme dates for tern and plover occupation in the Big Sandy (Ashland) area.

Earliest Nest Initiation	Latest Nest Initiation	Latest Date for Hatching	Latest Date for Fledging (flying)	Latest Date Birds Seen at Site
May 1 st	July 15 th	August 4 th	August 23 rd	August 23 rd

This table represents an estimate of extreme dates (early and late) using data collected from the past seven field seasons (1999-2005) by the Tern and Plover Conservation Partnership. Results from individual nest sites at sand and gravel mines can vary greatly between sites and year-to-year.

Nesting Deterrent



If your home is built by April the birds will tend to move nesting away from the existing building. Terns and plovers don't like to nest near large obstructions or activity, because it is easier for predators to approach their nests undetected. **In addition to building, planting grasses on your property (down as close to your recreational beach area as possible) is recommended to discourage nesting.** The birds prefer open, sparsely vegetated areas for nesting.

Extension specialists recommend using a seed-drill planting of an annual ryegrass and cereal mixture (found in turf mixtures) in March, at 80-100 pounds per acre or a bushel and a half per acre. Annual ryegrass is an erect, robust cool-season bunch grass that reaches a height of 3 to 4 feet. Plants are yellowish-green at the base and have 12-inch long glossy leaves. This species has a heavy, extensive, fibrous root system.

It is commonly used on poor soils or on sandy or rocky soils, where it normally produces better growth than do other cereal species. It is a good choice for fast, temporary cover on exposed areas with minimal seedbed preparation, such as construction and burned areas. It germinates quickly and can be used as a temporary ground cover while the slower growing bluegrass plants take hold. The plantings should last at least two years, and there may be some reseeding even though rye is an annual.



A seed drill can be rented through your local Natural Resources District.



For more information about least terns and piping plovers, please contact the Program Coordinator of the Tern and Plover Conservation Partnership, 402-472-8878.