

2025 INTERIOR LEAST TERN AND PIPING PLOVER ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE LOWER PLATTE RIVER, NEBRASKA



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Central Sand and Gravel	Lyman-Richey Corp.	Papio-Missouri NRD	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
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Lower Platte North NRD	Nebraska Public Power District	Sandy Pointe Development	
Lower Platte South NRD	Overland Sand and Gravel	Stalp Gravel Company	



PREFACE

This document reports on our monitoring, research, and management activities during the past 12 months (September 2024 – August 2025). We prepared it to inform our partners, cooperating agencies, funding sources, and other interested parties of our activities and to provide a preliminary summary of our results. To make the information in this document more accessible, it is divided into four sections: Introduction, Monitoring, Research, and Management.

Introduction: This section describes the project area and summarizes the conditions encountered during the 2025 field season.

Monitoring & Research: This section describes the data we collect every year for basic demographic analyses and includes the number of nests and chicks found in the focus area. These data are collected and summarized in a form that allows comparison across the ranges of both species. This section also describes our research objectives, research methods, data collection, and data analyses.

Management: This section describes our actions intended to protect Interior Least Terns and Piping Plovers and their nests from interference and disturbance.



Definitions

Off-River Site Definitions

Active mine – an off-river site managed by a sand and gravel mining company that is actively mined and is regulated by the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA).

Inactive mine – an off-river site managed by a sand and gravel mining company but is no longer actively mined and is no longer regulated by the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA).

Lakeshore housing development – an off-river site, usually managed by a homeowners' association, with at least one house on the property that an individual or family occupies for all or part of the year.

Off-river site – Any area used as breeding habitat by Least Terns and Piping Plovers located away from a river channel.

Transition site – an off-river site that is no longer managed by a sand and gravel mining company or regulated by the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) and does not have homeowners in residence on the property; transition sites are primarily managed by the real estate developer rather than a sand and gravel mining company or a homeowners' association.

Age Definitions

Adult – life stage after completing first migration cycle (winter-spring); a bird is in adult plumage one year of age or older and capable of breeding.

After hatch year – a bird in at least its second calendar year of life (Pyle 1997).

Chick – life stage from hatching to when a bird is capable of flight (Piping Plover: hatch day to 27 days post-hatch; Least Tern: hatch day to 20 days post-hatch).

Fledgling – Brief period when a juvenile bird is capable of short flights but is still dependent on parental care.

Hatch year – a bird in first-basic plumage during its first calendar year of life (Pyle 1997).

Juvenile – a bird in juvenal plumage, before the first prebasic molt (Pyle 1997).



Introduction

The lower Platte River and its major tributaries provide important nesting and migratory stopover habitat for two bird species of special conservation concern: the Interior Least Tern (*Sternula antillarum athalassos*) and Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*). Piping Plovers are protected under the national Endangered Species Act (ESA) and both species are protected under the Nebraska Nongame and Endangered Species Conservation Act. The Least Tern and Piping Plover Conservation Partnership (TPCP), based at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, School of Natural Resources, and the Nongame Bird Program (NBP), based at the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission (NGPC), work cooperatively on Interior Least Tern and Piping Plover monitoring, research, and management activities in Nebraska. The TPCP monitoring and research efforts are primarily focused along the lower Platte, Loup, and Elkhorn rivers in the eastern part of the state (Figure 1). However, we also work on Least Tern and Piping Plover issues across the state.

Focus Animals

Piping Plovers are small, migratory shorebirds often seen running along sandy shorelines. Adults are approximately 18 cm in length with a 48 cm wingspan. They feed on small invertebrates and insects and are frequently seen probing their bills into sandy substrates along the water's edge. The species was first described in 1824 from a type specimen collected in New Jersey (American Ornithologists' Union 1998). Meriwether Lewis and William Clark saw Piping Plovers and recorded their observations in what was to become the state of Nebraska, during their 1803–1805 “Voyage of Discovery” across North America. The species was placed on the Endangered Species List on 10 January 1986 (50 Federal Register 50726–50734), and the Northern Great Plains Recovery Plan (which covers Nebraska) was issued in May 1988. The listing status of this species is managed under the auspices of the Federal Endangered Species Act (1973) and the Nebraska Nongame and Endangered Species Conservation Act (Neb. Rev. Stat. § 37-801-11). Critical habitat for the Northern Great Plains breeding population was designated in Montana, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Minnesota on 11 September 2002 (67 Federal Register 57637). The United States District Court vacated the portion of critical habitat located in Nebraska on 13 October 2005; to date, it has not been reinstated.

Our mission is to prevent and mediate conflicts between nesting Least Terns and Piping Plovers and people, facilitate communication and promote proactive cooperation between agencies and people, and promote learning among stakeholders.

Interior Least Terns are the smallest Least Tern found in North America. They are feisty, swallow-shaped birds most often seen in flight. Adults are approximately 20 to 23 cm in length with a 50cm wingspan. They feed on small fish and are often observed hovering over water before diving to catch a small fish in their bill. They are colonial, nesting in close proximity to each other and placing their nest and eggs directly on the ground. The Least Tern was first described in 1847 from a type specimen collected in Guadeloupe, West Indies (American Ornithologists' Union 1998).

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark recorded their first observation of an Interior Least Tern on 5 August 1804 along the Missouri River, near present day Omaha, Nebraska, while on their 1803—1805 “Voyage of Discovery” across North America. The species was placed on the Endangered Species List on 27 June 1985 (50 Federal Register 21784–21792), and a Recovery Plan was issued in September 1990. As a result of their listing status, Interior Least Terns were protected by the Federal Endangered Species Act (1973) and the Nebraska Nongame and Endangered Species Conservation Act (Neb. Rev. Stat. § 37-80111). The Interior Least Tern was federally delisted on 13 January 2021 (86 Federal Register 2564-2581).

Piping Plovers and Interior Least Terns are integral parts of the fauna of Nebraska. Least Terns and Piping Plovers were described by all the major expeditions that passed through the region (e.g., Lewis and Clark, John James Audubon, Stephen Long, Duke Paul Wilhelm, Governor Kemble Warren, and Ferdinand Hayden), but they were known by Native Americans well before that period. Historically, Least Terns and Piping Plovers flourished on sparsely vegetated midstream sandbars of the Platte, Missouri, Loup, Elkhorn, and Niobrara rivers. However, much of this natural habitat has been lost due to broad-scale alterations of natural river systems. The amount of suitable sandbar habitat has been reduced by the presence of invasive plant species, construction of dams and reservoirs, river channelization, bank stabilization, hydropower generation, and water diversion. Least Terns and Piping Plovers frequently nest on human-created habitats that occur outside of the river channel. These habitats are created by industrial and commercial activities such as sand and gravel (aggregate) mining, dredging, and construction operations. This change in nesting habitat from mostly river sandbars to a combination of on-river and off-river habitats is the result of the decrease in available river nesting habitat and the increase in available human-created off-river nesting habitat.

Piping Plovers and Interior Least Terns are migratory birds that spend significant portions of the year in different parts of the Western Hemisphere. They are present in their nesting areas for about four months of the year. The other eight months are spent on migration and on their wintering areas. Piping Plovers spend the winter along the Gulf of Mexico, southern Atlantic Coast, in the Bahamas, and on other Caribbean Islands. These habitats are characterized by wide sandy beaches and a combination of sand flats, mudflats, tide pools, marshes, lagoons, and large inlets. Interior Least Terns spend the winter well offshore and along coasts, bays, estuaries, and river mouths near Central and South America. Loss of overwintering habitat contributed to the decline of both species. The principal threats to Least Tern and Piping Plover overwintering habitat include habitat loss and degradation, increased coastal residential and industrial development, and stochastic events (e.g., global sea level rise, oil spills, water pollution, and hurricanes).

Focus Area

We concentrated our monitoring and research efforts in our primary study area, from the Loup Power District diversion to the Missouri-Platte River confluence; throughout the remainder of this report our primary study area is referred to as the lower Platte River (Figure 1). We defined our study area as the lower Platte River system in eastern Nebraska, including portions of the central Platte, Loup and Elkhorn rivers and numerous off-river sites (Figure 2, Table 1). The TPCP concentrated its monitoring and research efforts on off-river nesting habitats in our primary study area. These off-river nesting habitats include lakeshore housing developments, active and inactive

sand and gravel mines, and transition sites. Some additional monitoring and research efforts occurred outside of our primary study area (e.g., sites in Hall and Merrick Counties, see Table 1). We defined the lower Platte River proper as the 103 river miles lying between the Loup-Platte River confluence (near Columbus, Platte County) and the Missouri-Platte River confluence (near Plattsmouth, Cass County) (Figure 1). The NBP has traditionally concentrated its monitoring and research on river sandbars along the lower Platte River proper from the North Bend bridge to Missouri River confluence, but not in recent years. The lower Platte River passes through eight counties (Platte, Colfax, Butler, Dodge, Saunders, Douglas, Sarpy, and Cass) and four Natural Resources Districts (Lower Platte South, Lower Platte North, Papio-Missouri, and Lower Loup).

2025 Off-River Conditions

We monitored 23 off-river sites in 2025. Conditions at off-river sites in 2025 were similar to years prior. Some sites provided minimal nesting habitat this year as they became increasingly vegetated or the number of houses increased. For example, one housing development (Ritz Lake, near Fremont, Nebraska) that hosted many nesting Least Terns in previous years had zero Least Tern nests in 2025. However, one transition site (Western Fremont, near Fremont, Nebraska) and two mine sites (West Center and Waterloo #40, near Valley, Nebraska) hosted many more nests than previous years due to increased sand area and removed vegetation. We continued to work closely with sand and gravel mining companies and their staff, developers, construction workers, and homeowners.

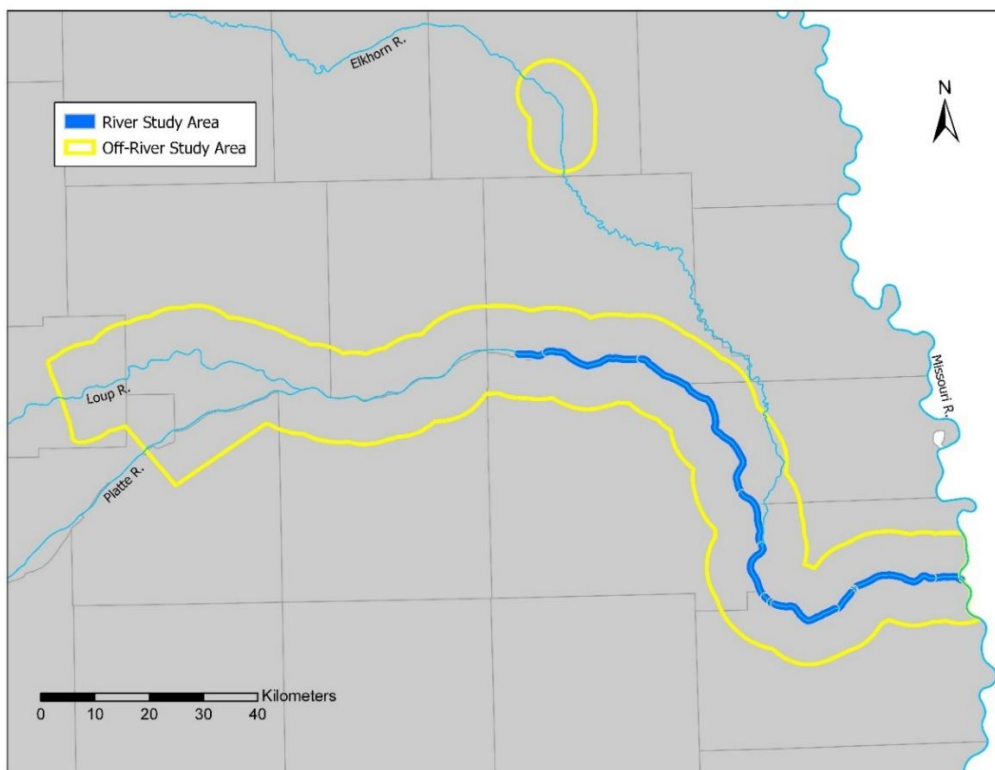


Figure 1. Off-river monitoring and research area for the Least Tern and Piping Plover Conservation Partnership (outlined in yellow), Nebraska. The dark blue outlines the Platte River and where the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has conducted on-river monitoring (on-river monitoring was not conducted in 2025).

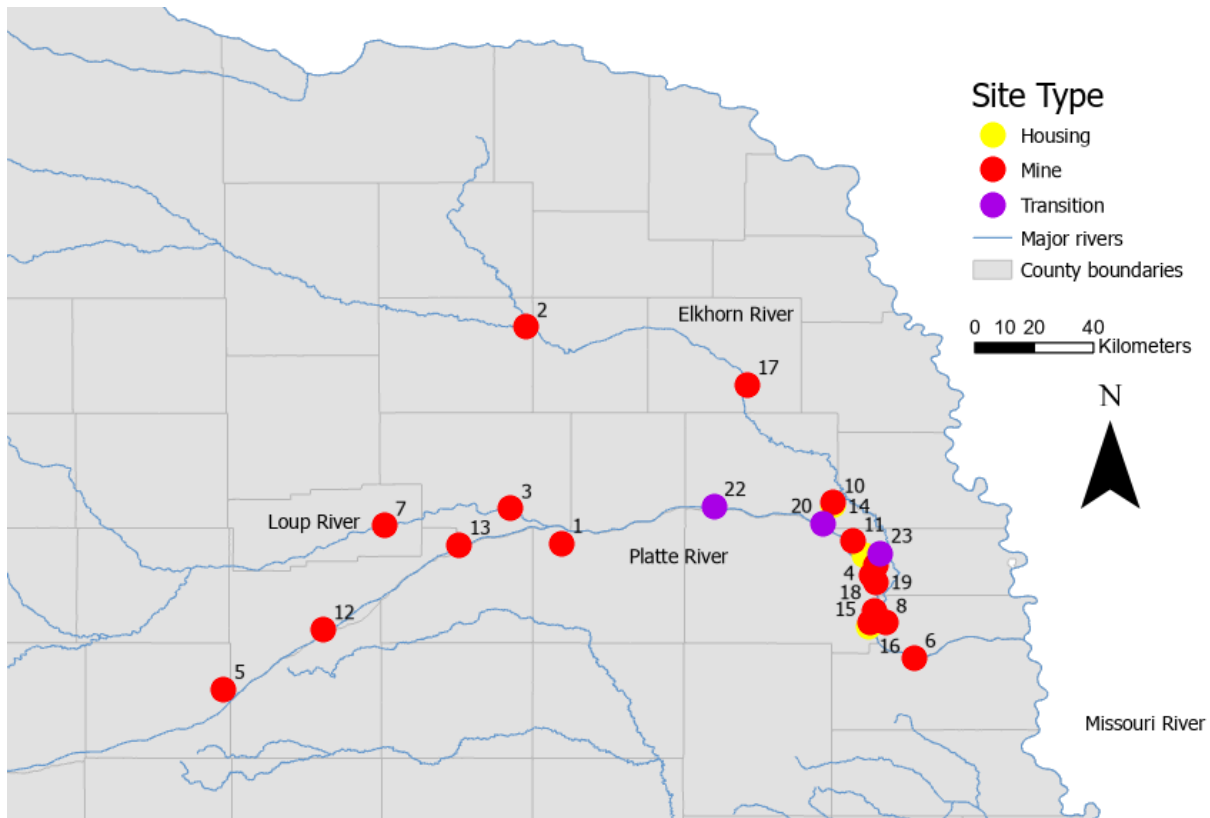


Figure 2. Locations of off-river Interior Least Tern and Piping Plover nesting areas within our study area are marked. Site numbers can be matched to Table 1.

2025 River Conditions

The amount of suitable sandbar nesting habitat on the lower Platte River varies from year to year. Daily and seasonal fluctuations in the volume of water flowing in the river caused by annual rainfall, ice and snow accumulation, ground water levels, and river channel morphology influence sandbar development and maintenance. General water flow conditions on the lower Platte River are monitored by the United States Geological Survey (USGS) stream gages.

Compared to some recent years, sandbar-nesting habitat on the lower Platte River in 2025 was moderate. Flow levels in the Platte River were low enough in May and June to expose sandbars. Peak flows occurred at the end of June, inundating lower elevation sandbars and likely washed away any nests or chicks (Figures 3 and 4). Overall, stream flows in 2025 created more optimal conditions for Least Tern and Piping Plover nesting compared to 2024. No surveys were conducted on the river in 2025.

Table 1. Off-river Interior Least Tern and Piping Plover monitoring sites and occurrence of nesting activity in the lower Platte River region, Nebraska, 2025.

#	Site Name	River	Owner	Site Type	County	2025 Nesting
1	Bellwood #73	Platte	Central Sand and Gravel	Active Mine	Butler	Yes
2	Norfolk #76 ^a	Elkhorn	Central Sand and Gravel	Active Mine	Madison	Yes
3	Columbus #71	Loup	Central Sand and Gravel	Active Mine	Platte	Yes
4	Flatwater Lake	Platte	Flatwater Lake Development	Housing	Douglas	No
5	Grand Island #97 ^b	Platte	Central Sand and Gravel	Active Mine	Hall	No
6	Louisville Lakes	Platte	Western Sand and Gravel	Active Mine	Sarpy	Yes
7	LPD-Loup Diversion	Loup	Preferred Rocks - LPD	Active Mine	Nance	Yes
8	Gretna Bottoms #52 ^c	Platte	Lyman Richey Sand and Gravel	Active Mine	Sarpy	Yes
9	Martin Marietta - Waterloo	Platte	Martin Marietta Inc.	Active Mine	Douglas	No
10	Fremont #45 ^d	Platte	Lyman Richey Sand and Gravel	Active Mine	Dodge	Yes
11	North Valley ^e	Platte	Martin Marietta Inc.	Active Mine	Dodge	Yes
12	Central City	Platte	Overland Sand and Gravel	Active Mine	Merrick	Yes
13	Silver Creek	Platte	Overland Sand and Gravel	Active Mine	Merrick	Yes
14	Ritz Lake	Platte	Homeowners' Association	Housing	Dodge	Yes
15	Sand Creek	Platte	Western Sand and Gravel	Active Mine	Saunders	Yes
16	Sandy Pointe	Platte	Sandy Pointe Dev.	Housing	Saunders	Yes
17	Stalp - West Point	Elkhorn	Stalp Gravel Company	Active Mine	Cumming	Yes
18	Waterloo #40	Platte	Lyman Richey Sand and Gravel	Active Mine	Douglas	Yes
19	West Center ^f	Platte	Martin Marietta Inc.	Active Mine	Saunders	Yes
20	Western - Fremont	Platte	Western Sand and Gravel	Active Mine	Dodge	Yes
21	Western - G Plant	Platte	Western Sand and Gravel	Active Mine	Saunders	Yes
22	North Bend	Platte		Transition	Dodge	Yes
23	Valley Site	Platte		Transition	Douglas	Yes

^areferred to as Norfolk in prior reports

^breferred to as Grand Island in prior reports

^creferred to as Lyman-Richey Gretna in prior reports

^dreferred to as NE Fremont North in prior reports

^ereferred to as KMG in prior reports

^freferred to as OMG in prior reports

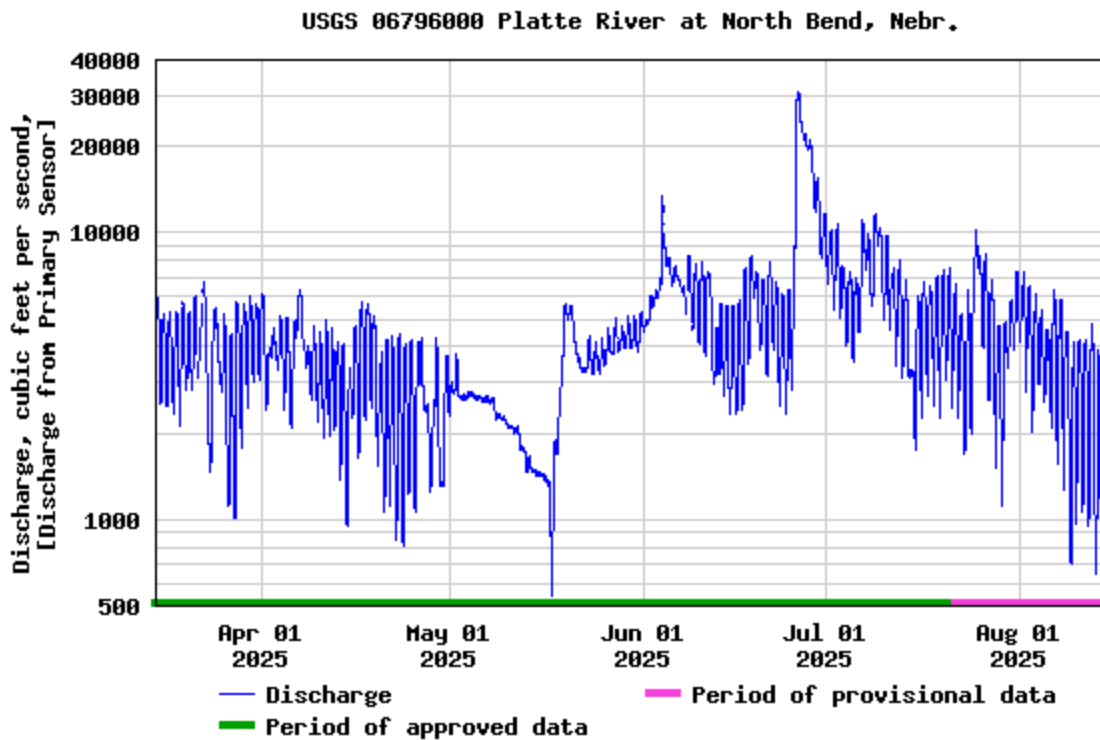


Figure 3. Daily water discharge (cubic feet per second; cfs) from 15 March – 15 August 2025, measured at the North Bend gage, Dodge County, Nebraska (nwis.waterdata.usgs.gov).

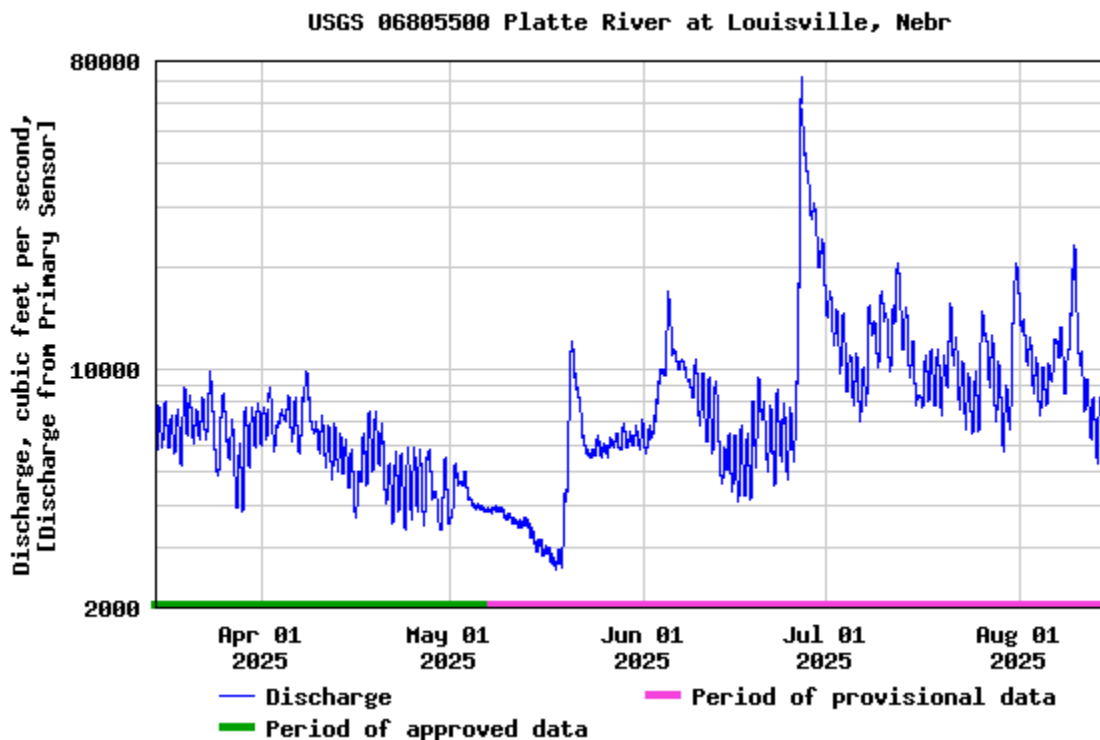


Figure 4. Daily water discharge (cubic feet per second; cfs) from 15 March – 15 August 2025, measured at the Louisville gage, Sarpy County, Nebraska (nwis.waterdata.usgs.gov).

Color Banding Schemes across the U.S. and Canada

Piping Plovers and Interior Least Terns are banded by authorized research groups across their ranges. Piping Plovers have longer legs than Least Terns which makes it much easier to mark them with color bands. Throughout their range Piping Plovers receive one to six leg bands and Least Terns generally receive one or two leg bands depending on the site where they are banded (Figure 5). Piping Plover research groups, based across the U.S. and Canada, place different colored flags on a Piping Plover's upper leg to indicate where they were originally banded (Figure 6).



Figure 5. Examples of bands on Piping Plover (left) and Interior Least Tern chick (right; chicks banded previously to 2024).

Piping Plover Banding Regions

Breeding Range

- Canada = Black, Gray, or White Flag
- Great Lakes = Orange Flag
- Northern Missouri River = Yellow Flag
- Southern Missouri River = Green Flag
- Platte River = Light Blue Flag
- Atlantic Coast = no bands

Wintering Range

- Gulf Oil Spill Study = Green Flag
- Texas = Red Flag
- Bahamas = Pink Flag



Figure 6. Piping Plover research groups place different colored flags on Piping Plovers to indicate where they were originally banded.



Monitoring & Research

Banding & Re-Sighting

Methods

We conducted all bird capture and banding under the authorization of the USGS Bird Banding Laboratory (Patuxent Wildlife Research Center; <http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl>) and NGPC's banding permit (JGJ holds Federal Master Station Bird Bander Permit #20259 with Threatened and Endangered Species endorsements). Color-band combinations are coordinated prior to the beginning of the field season with the Bird Banding Laboratory and others with an interest in Least Tern and Piping Plover research.

In 2025, we captured and banded adult Piping Plovers. We did not band any Least Terns. The capture, handling, and banding protocols used for Piping Plovers were the same as those used in previous years. Adult Piping Plovers were captured using a simple box trap placed over the nest. This method is effective and minimizes risk of injury to the adult and eggs. Box traps have no moving parts; the bird walks through the door, settles on its nest, and is captured.

We exercise great caution when handling and banding birds. We do not capture or band birds during extreme weather (cold, windy, rainy, or when inclement weather was forecast) or when the temperature was above 90° F (32.2° C). Birds are observed after banding and on subsequent visits to determine if there are any behavioral changes or signs of injury. As part of our protocol, we are to suspend all banding activities if problems or injuries were observed at any time. We did not observe any problems or injuries to birds as a result of monitoring, capture, handling, or banding in 2025.

We banded Piping Plover adults with an individually numbered metal USGS band (size 1A) on one of the upper legs. We placed a blue alphanumeric flag on the opposite upper leg; the blue flag indicates that this bird was banded in Nebraska along the Platte River. This season, we placed only dark blue alphanumeric flags on the upper leg of birds with no plastic color bands on the lower legs (Figure 7).

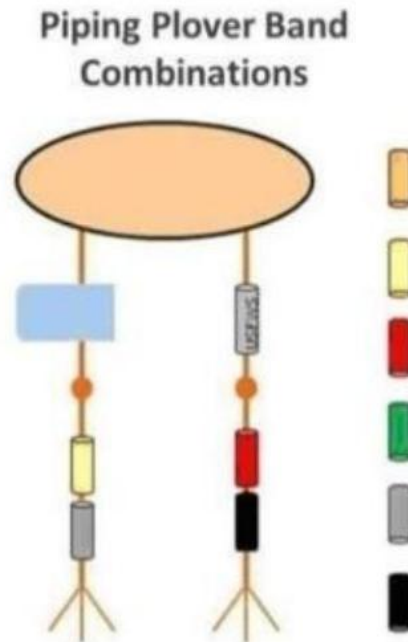


Figure 7. Diagram illustrating the banding scheme used on Piping Plovers banded along the lower Platte River, Nebraska, prior to 2025. The flags, color bands, and metal bands may be on either leg and color combinations vary. The flags may be light blue or dark blue with white alphanumeric characters. Piping Plovers banded after 2018 were banded with a single dark blue alphanumeric flag on the upper leg.

Results

We banded 9 Piping Plovers in 2025. All banding occurred at off-river sites. To date, we have banded 878 Piping Plovers: 202 adults and 676 chicks (Table 2). Most Piping Plovers ($n = 873$) color-banded in our primary study area were captured at off-river sites; we banded five Piping Plover chicks with USGS bands only on river sandbars in 2009. We did not band any Least Terns in 2025 (Table 3).

In 2025, we re-sighted 14 Piping Plovers previously banded in our primary study area. We observed four Piping Plovers with light blue flags and ten with alphanumeric blue flags indicating they were originally banded along the lower Platte River.



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Table 2. Numbers of Piping Plovers banded along the lower Platte River each year.

Year	Adults	Chicks	Total
2008	19	12	31
2009	18	23	41
2010	9	48	57
2011	15	31	46
2012	11	73	84
2013	15	58	73
2014	27	72	99
2015	17	93	110
2016	15	129	144
2017	11	113	124
2018	8	24	32
2019	0	0	0
2020	1	0	1
2021	3	0	3
2022	4	0	4
2023	6	0	6
2024	14	0	14
2025	9	0	9
Total	202	676	878

Table 3. Numbers of Interior Least Terns banded on the lower Platte River each year.

Year	Adults	Chicks	Total
2008	0	168	168
2009	0	199	199
2010	0	118	118
2011	0	120	120
2012	0	76	76
2013	0	93	93
2014	0	190	190
2015	20	202	222
2016	7	121	128
2017	0	126	126
2018-2025	0	0	0
TOTAL	27	1,287	1,440

Monitoring Regional Movements of Banded Least Terns and Piping Plovers

Piping Plover Breeding Season Observations

Over the last 15 years, a number of Piping Plovers originally banded along the lower Platte River have been re-sighted nesting in other locations across the Great Plains (Table 4). In 2023, we altered our methods for tabulating re-sighting observations, utilizing database management tools in Program R (R Core Team, 2023). Furthermore, changes in personnel, especially in 2018, may have resulted in some re-sight information being lost. These factors may result in different numbers being reported here compared to previous reports. Of the 869 Piping Plovers banded on the lower Platte River prior to 2025, 271 (31%) have been re-sighted during the breeding season at least one year after they were banded. Two hundred and forty-five (245) returned to nest along the lower Platte River, four have been observed on the central Platte River, 31 have been observed on the Missouri River, seven have been observed on the Niobrara River, and one has been observed in the alkali lakes region of North Dakota. A majority (53%) of lower Platte River Piping Plovers that returned to the lower Platte River to nest were originally banded as adults. A majority (80%) of lower Platte River Piping Plovers reported outside of the lower Platte River study area during the nesting season were originally banded as chicks. Overall, 60% of the lower Platte River Piping Plovers banded as adults and 21% of the lower Platte River Piping Plovers banded as chicks have been re-sighted at least once during a breeding season at least one year after they were banded. In 2025, we did not receive any reports of lower Platte River Piping Plovers nesting outside the study area.

Since 2008, we have observed Piping Plovers in our primary study area which were originally banded in locations throughout the Great Plains and U.S. Gulf Coast. However, during the 2025 breeding season, we only observed Piping Plovers that were originally banded along the lower Platte River.

Table 4. Number of Piping Plovers previously banded along the lower Platter River and re-sighted during the breeding season at least one year after they were originally banded. Some individuals were re-sighted in multiple breeding locations but are only counted once for the total.

Age banded	Region re-sighted					TOTAL individuals re-sighted
	lower Platte River	central Platte River	Missouri River	Niobrara River	North Dakota	
Adults	125	1	7	0	0	126
Chicks	113	3	24	7	1	138
TOTAL individuals re-sighted	238	4	31	7	1	263

Piping Plover Non-Breeding Season Observations

Every year a number of Piping Plovers banded along the lower Platte River are observed during the non-breeding season (Figure 8). As of 15 August 2025, we received 16 reports of lower Platte River Piping Plovers in their non-breeding range following the 2025 breeding season; 11 Piping Plovers were observed along the U.S. Gulf and Atlantic coasts.

Over the course of this study, 168 Piping Plovers (68 adults; 100 chicks) originally banded in our primary study area have been re-sighted in their non-breeding range during the non-breeding season, with several birds observed more than once. Sightings of lower Platte River Piping Plovers during the non-breeding season extend from the southern tip of Texas to the Florida Keys, and north along the U.S. Atlantic Coast to South Carolina. In December 2017, our first non-breeding observation of a lower Platte River Piping Plover outside of the U.S. was reported and photographed at Isla Holbox, Quintana Roo, Mexico (north of Cancun). The same Piping Plover was re-sighted there during the following non-breeding season, in 2018. Two more lower Platte River Piping Plovers were reported during the non-breeding season in the same location, one individual in 2019, another in both 2022 and 2023, and one in 2024.

Lower Platte River Piping Plovers have been reported in seven states and 34 counties along the U.S. coast (Table 5). Since 2008, we have received a total of 842 reports of lower Platte River Piping Plovers observed during the non-breeding seasons (2008–2025), with most reports provided by researchers, resident and visiting birders and recreational wildlife photographers. The majority of non-breeding re-sightings have occurred along the U.S. Gulf Coast. The first reports of lower Platte River Piping Plovers along the U.S. Atlantic Coast occurred during the non-breeding season of 2012–2013. To date, eight lower Platte River Piping Plovers have been observed during the non-breeding season along the U.S. Atlantic Coast.

Table 5. States/Countries where lower Platte River (LPR), Nebraska, Piping Plovers have been observed during the non-breeding season. Eleven individuals have been re-sighted in more than one state but are only counted once for the total. Resighting reports for six individuals do not have state location information available; these are excluded from the total.

State	# of LPR Piping Plovers
Alabama	4
Florida	23
Georgia	2
Louisiana	28
Mississippi	7
South Carolina	2
Texas	102
Mexico	4
TOTAL	168

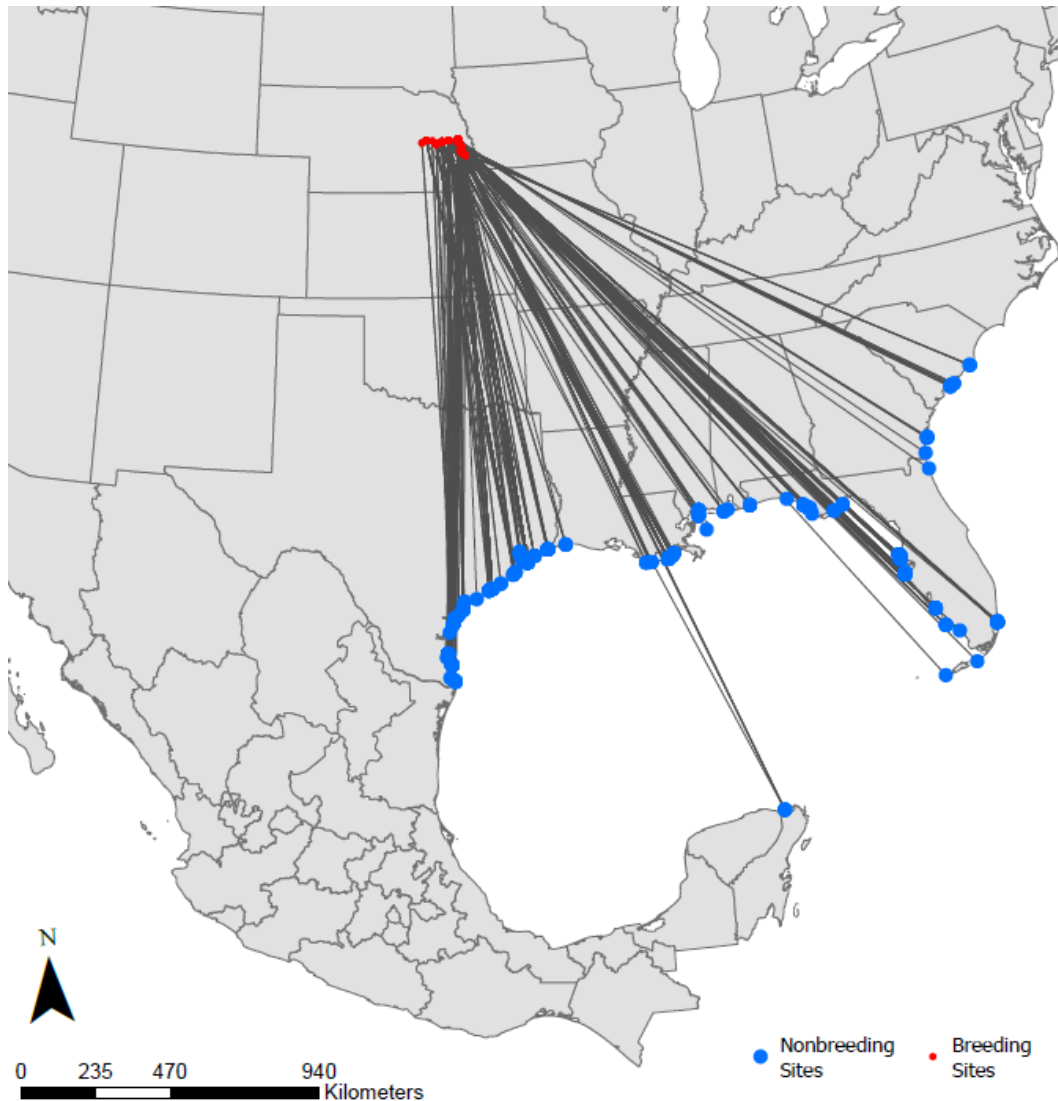


Figure 8. Locations where Piping Plovers marked with light blue-leg tags banded in the lower Platte River region, Nebraska, have been observed during the non-breeding season on the U.S. Gulf and Atlantic coasts and the Yucatan Peninsula, 2008-2025.

Monitoring Nests and Chicks

Methods: Off-River Habitat

In 2025, we began conducting Least Tern and Piping Plover surveys at off-river sites in late April. Throughout the breeding season (late April – early August), we surveyed off-river sites at least once every five to seven days. Site visit frequency was modified at some sites depending on Least Tern and Piping Plover presence and activity, especially during the latter part of the nesting season. During each visit to off-river sites, we searched for adult birds, located new nests, checked the status of known nests, and searched for Least Tern and Piping Plover chicks. In addition to tracking nest and chick status, we also banded adult Piping Plovers. Every time a new nest was found, we

assigned it a unique identification number and recorded the nest location using a handheld GPS unit (Garmin Oregon 550t, Garmin Ltd., Olathe, KS, USA). We recorded the number of eggs in each nest and “floated” the eggs in water to determine the nest initiation date (Hays and LeCroy 1972). Using the egg floating data, we calculated the eggs’ expected hatch date, assuming a 28-day incubation period for Piping Plovers and a 21-day incubation period for Least Terns. A majority of the nests were located one to seven days after the first egg was laid. During each subsequent nest check, after the day the nest was found, we checked eggs for any damage and recorded the status of each nest. We determined the status of each Least Tern and Piping Plover nest based on the following criteria:

<u>Confirmed Successful</u> : newly-hatched chick(s) observed in the nest cup or in the immediate vicinity (< 1 meter)
<u>Likely Successful</u> : empty, but intact nest cup located on or after the expected hatch date; nest cup may contain small pieces of eggshell; ‘pipped’ eggs observed prior to finding nest empty
<u>Confirmed Failed</u> : nest cup and/or eggs found destroyed or abandoned
<u>Likely Failed</u> : nest not relocated on repeat visits prior to expected hatch date
<u>Undetermined</u> : nest not re-checked prior to hatch date or not enough evidence to determine fate

At some off-river sites, Least Terns and Piping Plovers placed their nests in areas not accessible to us for safety reasons. In these cases, we only recorded the number of nests, eggs, adults, chicks, fledglings and juveniles that were visible from a distance. We recorded the total number of active nests and the total number of Least Terns and Piping Plovers into one of the defined age classes (adults, chicks, fledglings, or juveniles; see Definitions).

We recorded any notable observations including weather conditions, bird injuries, and evidence of disturbance caused by humans, dogs, cats, vehicles, natural predators, or recent severe weather events. We also recorded the band combinations of all Least Terns and Piping Plovers observed or recaptured with leg bands.

Results: Off-River Habitat

In 2025, we located 73 Piping Plover nests and 388 Least Tern nests at off-river sites in our study area (Table 6). These nests were distributed across 23 sites: one site along the Loup River, 17 sites along the lower Platte River, three sites along the central Platte River, and two sites along the Elkhorn River (Figures 9–10). Nests were located at three transition sites, two lakeshore housing developments, and 16 sand and gravel mines. In 2025, 57.5% of Piping Plover nests and 30.7% of Least Tern nests were determined to be confirmed or likely successful, while 31.5% of Piping Plover nests and 45.9% of Least Tern nests were classified as confirmed or likely failed (excluding 8 Piping Plover nests and 91 Least Tern nests with undetermined fate; Tables 7–8). An increase in nest failures from previous years may be attributed to higher rates of predation and severe storms. We observed 66 Piping Plover chicks and 111 Least Tern chicks at off-river sites (Table 6).

Table 6. The number of Interior Least Tern and Piping Plover nests and chicks observed at each off-river site along the lower Platte River, Nebraska, 2025.

Site Name	Site Type	Piping Plover		Least Tern	
		# Nests	# Chicks	# Nests	# Chicks
Bellwood #73	Active Mine	9	3	27	5
Norfolk #76	Active Mine	0	0	4	4
Columbus #71	Active Mine	3	10	15	6
Flatwater	Housing	0	0	0	0
Grand Island #97	Active Mine	0	0	0	0
Louisville Lakes	Active Mine	4	1	8	0
LPD-Loup Diversion	Active Mine	2	0	15	2
Gretna Bottoms #52	Active Mine	8	3	13	0
Martin Marietta - Waterloo	Active Mine	0	0	0	0
Fremont #45	Active Mine	1	0	4	0
North Valley	Active Mine	3	1	37	6
Central City	Active Mine	1	0	4	0
Silver Creek	Active Mine	1	0	0	0
Ritz Lake	Housing	4	3	0	0
Sand Creek	Active Mine	4	6	22	1
Sandy Pointe	Housing	2	0	0	0
Stalp - West Point	Active Mine	2	3	18	11
Waterloo #40	Active Mine	9	6	23	8
West Center	Active Mine	3	6	19	10
Western – Fremont	Transition	14	18	126	25
Western – G Plant	Active Mine	1	0	24	18
North Bend	Transition	0	0	1	0
Valley Site	Transition	2	6	28	15
TOTAL		73	66	388	111



Eric Fowler

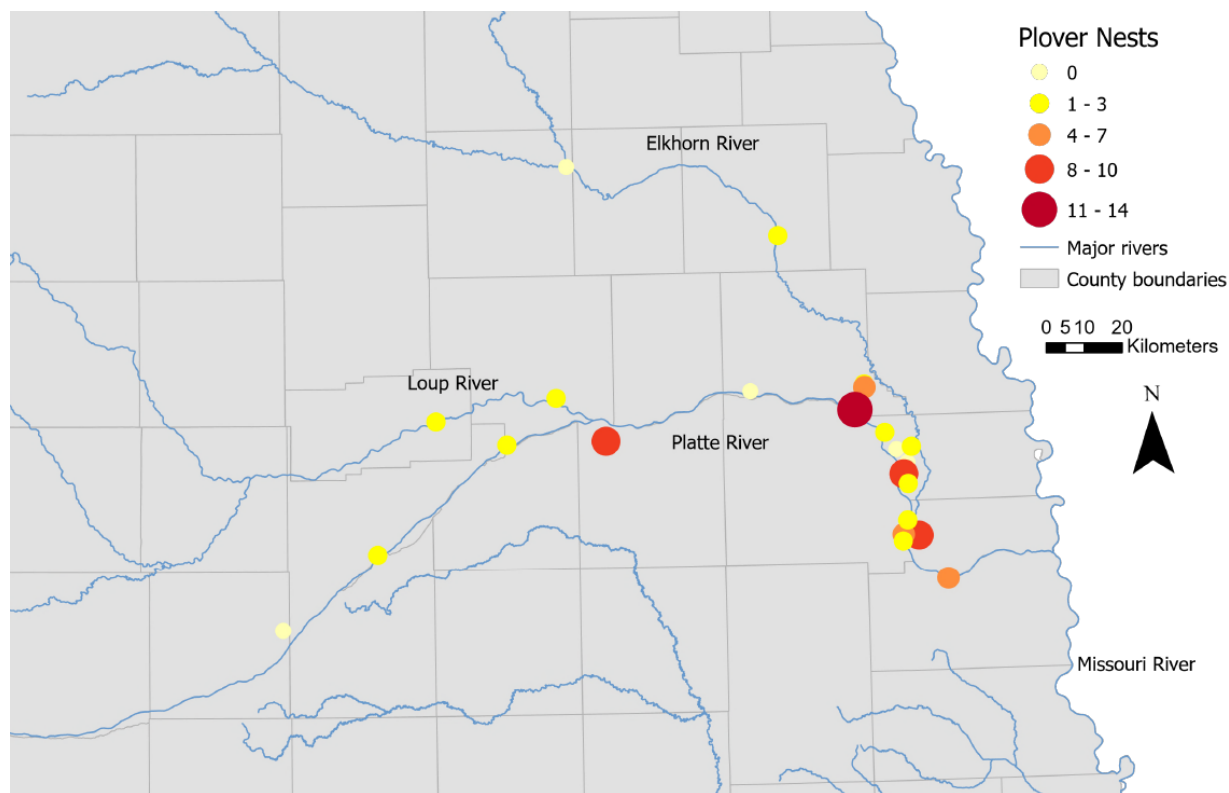


Figure 9. Locations and numbers of Piping Plover nests at off-river sites along the lower Platte River, Nebraska, 2025.

Table 7. Piping Plover nest fates at off-river sites along the lower Platte River, Nebraska, in 2025.

Nest Fate	Mines	Transition	Housing	Total
Confirmed Hatched	14	8	1	23
Likely Hatched	13	5	1	19
Confirmed Failed	18	2	3	23
Likely Failed	0	0	0	0
Undetermined	6	1	1	8
TOTAL	51	16	6	73

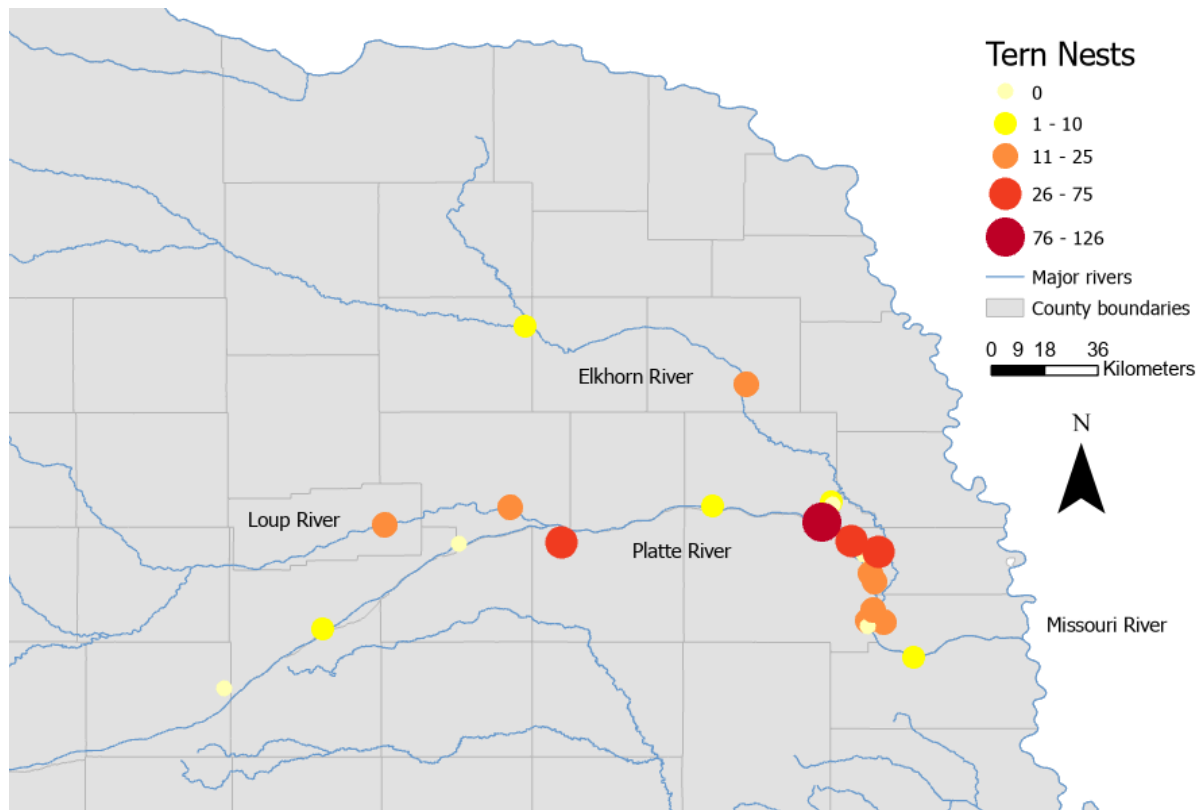


Figure 10. Locations and numbers of nests at off-river Interior Least Tern nest sites along the lower Platte River, Nebraska, 2025.

Table 8. Interior Least Tern nest fates at off-river sites along the lower Platte River, Nebraska in 2025.

Nest Fate	Mines	Transition	Housing	Total
Confirmed Hatched	39	15	0	54
Likely Hatched	38	27	0	65
Confirmed Failed	111	65	0	176
Likely Failed	0	0	0	0
Undetermined	43	50	0	93
TOTAL	231	157	0	388

Nest Survival Analysis

Methods

We estimated nest survival for Piping Plovers and Least Terns using statistical modeling techniques with Program MARK (White and Burnham 1999) and the *RMark* package (Laake 2013) in Program R (R Core Team, 2023). We constructed encounter histories by summarizing the day each nest was found, the last day the nest was found active, the last day the nest was checked for activity, and the fate of the nest. Due to small sample sizes, we did not include any covariates in our model and assumed constant survival across the season. We provide both daily

survival probability and the probability of nest success. Nest success is the probability a nest will survive the 21- (Least Tern) or 28-day (Piping Plover) incubation period to hatch at least one chick and is estimated by raising the daily survival probability to the appropriate number of incubation days.

Results

Piping Plover Nest Survival

We estimated Piping Plover nest survival probabilities from 62 nests located at off-river sites (44 at sand and gravel mines, 13 at a transition site, and 5 at lakeshore housing developments; Table 7). The mean age of nest when found was 7 days (range: 1–24). We excluded eight nests with undetermined fate (six at mine sites, one at a transition site, and one at a housing development) and three nests that were found hatched (one at a mine site and two at transition sites) from analysis. In 2025, all off-river Piping Plover nests had a daily survival probability of 0.981 (95% C.I. [confidence interval]; 0.974, 0.986) and nest success probability of 0.593 (95% C.I.; 0.593, 0.593). Piping Plover nests at sand and gravel mines had a daily survival probability of 0.977 (95% C.I.; 0.964, 0.986) and a nest success probability of 0.535 (95% C.I.; 0.535, 0.535). Piping Plover nests at transition sites had a daily survival probability of 0.993 (95% C.I.; 0.926, 0.998) and a nest success probability of 0.848 (95% C.I.; 0.823, 0.874). Piping Plover nests at lakeshore housing developments had a daily survival probability of 0.964 (95% C.I.; 0.894, 0.988) and a nest success probability of 0.370 (confidence interval 0.370, 0.370; Figure 11).

In 2025, we placed protective exclosures around 10 out of 73 off-river Piping Plover nests (9 out of 62 nests included in analysis were exclosed). We placed protective exclosures around 7% of nests at sand and gravel mines, 6% of nests at transition sites, and 100% of nests at lakeshore housing developments (9%, 8%, and 80% of nests included in analysis, respectively). Nests with protective exclosures had a daily survival probability of 0.990 (95% C.I.; 0.963, 0.998) and a nest success probability of 0.771 (95% C.I.; 0.763, 0.779); nests without protective exclosures had a daily survival probability of 0.979 (95% C.I.; 0.968, 0.986) and a nest success probability of 0.561 (95% C.I.; 0.560, 0.561; Figure 12). No other predator control or management is implemented at our sites.



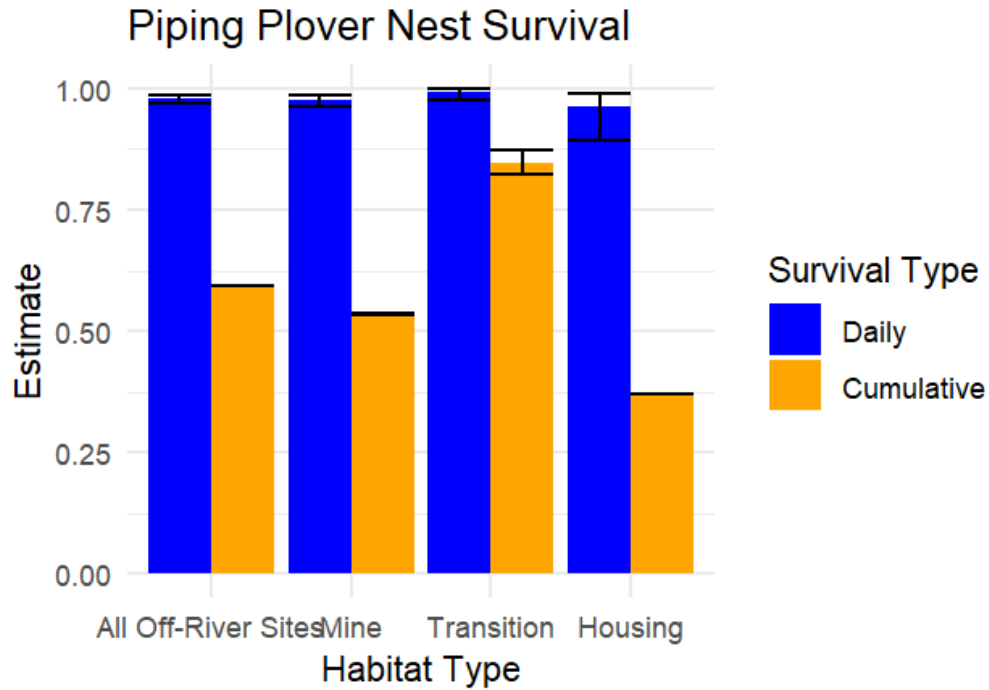


Figure 11. Daily survival and nest success probabilities (cumulative survival over 28-day incubation period) of Piping Plover nests at all off-river sites, lakeshore housing developments, sand and gravel mines, and transition sites, lower Platte River, Nebraska, 2025.

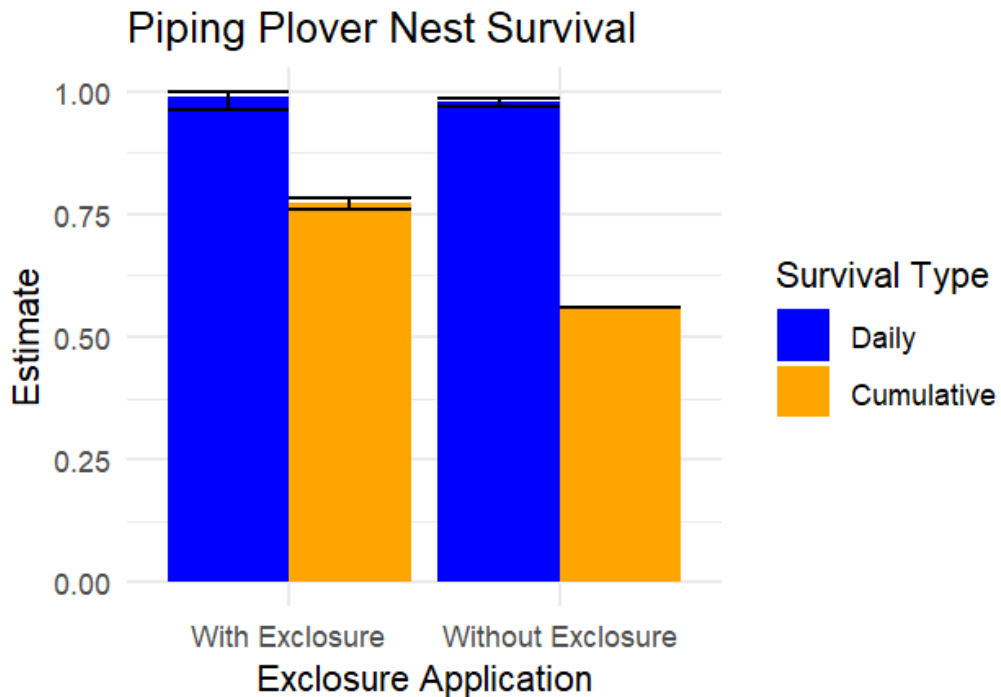


Figure 12. Daily survival and nest success probabilities (cumulative survival over 28-day incubation period) of Piping Plover nests at off-river sites with protective enclosures and those without protective enclosures, lower Platte River, Nebraska, 2025.

Interior Least Tern Nest Survival

We estimated Interior Least Tern nest survival probabilities from 292 nests at off-river sites (187 at sand and gravel mines and 105 at transition sites; Table 8). The mean age of nest when found was 5 days (range: 1–20). We excluded 91 nests with undetermined fate (46 at mine sites and 45 at transition sites), three nests that were found failed (one at a mine site and three at transition sites), and one nest that was found hatched (at a mine site) from analysis. The daily survival probability of off-river Least Tern nests was 0.950 (95% C.I.; 0.942, 0.957) and nest success probability was 0.358 (95% C.I.; 0.358, 0.358). Least Tern nests at sand and gravel mines had a daily survival probability of 0.951 (95% C.I.; 0.942, 0.960) and a nest success probability of 0.371 (95% C.I.; 0.371, 0.371). Least Tern nests at transition sites had a daily survival probability of 0.946 (95% C.I.; 0.931, 0.958) and a nest success probability of 0.333 (95% C.I.; 0.333, 0.333; Figure 13).

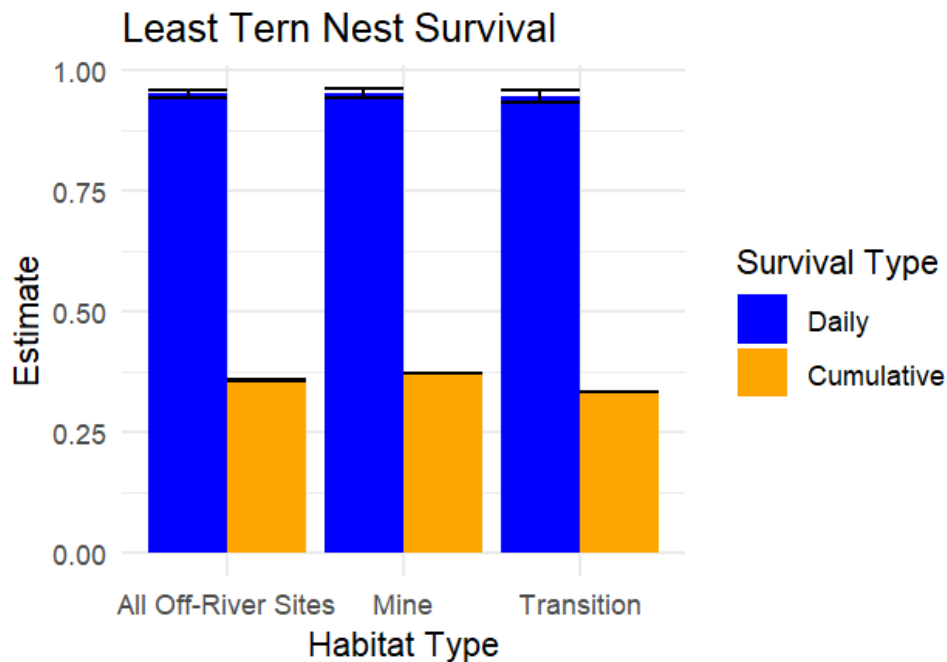


Figure 13. Daily survival and nest success probabilities (cumulative survival over 21-day incubation period) of Least Tern nests at all off-river sites, lakeshore housing developments, sand and gravel mines, and transition sites, lower Platte River, Nebraska, 2025.

Management

The TPCP uses a voluntary, proactive approach to reduce human-bird conflicts and avoid the need for law enforcement actions in Interior Least Tern and Piping Plover management. Before Least Terns and Piping Plovers return to Nebraska in the spring and the field season begins, TPCP personnel meet with the production crews and property managers of the aggregate (sand and gravel) mines in our focus area. We discuss production plans for the upcoming season, safety regulations, and site access. We pay particular attention to concerns mine personnel have regarding on-site activities of the TPCP and changes to federal MSHA (Mine Safety and Health Administration) policy as it applies to personnel not employed by the mine and who have completed safety training. We also meet with real estate developers and homeowners' associations at the lakeshore housing developments. At these meetings, we discuss the construction plans for the area and site access. We pay particular attention to property owners' concerns regarding on-site activities of the TPCP.

The result of these meetings is a set of site-specific management and monitoring plans; an equally valuable result is the TPCP becoming better acquainted with the people living and working at these sites. This makes our management efforts easier to implement and more effective as the nesting season progresses. We maintain close contact with these individuals throughout the season, so we can quickly respond to any on-site changes that develop.

Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) and Institutional Animal Care and Use (IACUC)

Every year, all TPCP personnel receive MSHA training and certification for scientific (non-miner) workers. In 2024, our training was again provided by Tim Zuehlke, a MSHA certified trainer, and included mine safety, Red Cross First Aid, CPR and AED training. Copies of TPCP personnel certification cards are provided to the mining companies for their records. The Program's Coordinator completed University of Nebraska Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) training and maintains IACUC protocols and reporting.

Protecting Interior Least Tern and Piping Plover Nests

To protect Least Tern and Piping Plover nesting areas, we erect "Keep Out" signs around the perimeter of all off-river nesting areas; these signs were designed in 2008 by the TPCP and have been widely adopted for use across Nebraska and other parts of the northern Great Plains. In areas where human foot or vehicle traffic is to be expected, we add 'psychological' barriers. These barriers consist of black or orange cord tied between the "Keep Out" signposts with red-silver Mylar™ streamers attached to the cord to make it more visible.

Based on conversations with mine personnel and homeowners' associations before the nesting season begins, we mark off the areas where it would be safest for Least Terns and Piping Plovers not to nest. At mines, these are areas that are going to be dredged during the nesting season or where heavy equipment will be operating. At housing developments, these are areas where buildings are to be constructed or utilities are to be installed. We know that Least Terns and Piping Plovers avoid nesting in areas where the 1) substrate is disturbed by raking, 2) vegetation is present, 3) substrate particle size is unattractive to the birds or 4) areas are physically disturbed in some

other way (Marcus et al. 2007). In addition to planting vegetation, resurfacing the sand, and raking the substrate, we often opt for a physical method of discouraging birds from nesting in an area. Before the birds arrive, we put up grids of three-foot tall fiberglass poles with 16-foot-long streamers of red-silver Mylar™ flagging attached to them. The poles are set 16 feet apart. When the streamers blow in the wind, they make a crackling sound and sweep the ground, which discourages the birds from attempting to nest in the area.

We use protective wire mesh nest enclosures around Piping Plover nests, but not Least Tern nests because of the birds' behavior around their nests; Piping Plovers walk up to their nests, while Least Terns fly into their nests. These enclosures help to protect Piping Plover nests from both human disturbance and natural predation. We do not install enclosures around nests that are physically inaccessible (but viewed with scopes and binoculars), in locations that are difficult to observe for confirmation that the adult returns to the nest following enclosure installation, or otherwise impractical.

For Least Terns, we place symbolic protective boundaries around Least Tern nesting colonies that are in areas with human activity. We do this by placing a ring of 3-foot tall rebar poles around the nesting area; black cord with red-silver Mylar™ strips are tied between each of the poles. These marked off areas only help to protect Least Tern nests from human disturbance; they do not reduce natural predation.

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