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Photo Credit: Indiana USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

## Interior Least Terns Making A Comeback in Indiana



Photo Credit: Indiana Department of Natural Resources

Two adult Interior Least Terns feeding offspring on Tern Island



Photo Credit: Indiana Department of Natural Resources

Interior Least Tern chick nesting



Photo Credit: Steve Gifford

Interior Least Tern Incubating an egg on Tern Island

There is something special going on in southwestern Indiana and people are starting to take notice.

“I would call it magical to be honest,” said Allisyn-Marie Gillet, Ornithologist for the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (IDNR).

Located along the path of the Mississippi flyway lies the Goose Pond Fish and Wildlife area – an area that has significantly improved the flyway’s terrain. This region, once landscaped by tiled cropland and homesteads, is now reestablished as 9,018 acres of prairie and marsh habitat. Featuring more than 7,000 acres of wetlands restored through the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s (NRCS) Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), Goose Pond is one of the largest wetland restoration projects in the nation and provides crucial habitat for migratory birds traveling from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. And atop a 2.7-acre man-made island located in Goose Pond, the interior least tern, a federal and state listed endangered species, is making its comeback.

Interior least terns, the smallest tern in North America characterized by the black crown on its head, can typically be found nesting on gravel sandbars along rivers, lakes and gravel pits, but changes to river systems including dams, reservoirs, water diversions and recreation have disturbed or eliminated most least tern nesting habitats in the Midwest. As a result, they were listed as a federally endangered species in 1985.

“Least terns are very sensitive to disturbance and outside influences,” said Gillet. “The whole reason why they became endangered in the first place is because their natural habitat often gets disturbed by recreational activities and they abandon their nests.”

But their story in Indiana doesn’t end there. Not long after the federal listing, a pair of breeding birds were identified on a dike along Gibson Lake. Because of the location of the nest, measures were taken through a habitat conservation plan which called for efforts to conserve or create more habitat for the nesting birds. As a result of these efforts, two WRP easement areas were acquired and restored by IDNR in Gibson County – Cane Ridge Wildlife Management Area and Tern Bar Slough Diversity Conservation Area.



*WRP is a program that provides technical and financial assistance directly to private landowners and eligible entities to purchase a conservation easement on agricultural lands to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands.*

Photo Credit: Danielle Williams

The success of these two wetland areas didn't go unnoticed. In 2008, almost 70 miles north of Cane Ridge and Tern Bar Slough, NRCS expanded efforts at the Goose Pond Fish and Wildlife area by building an island dedicated specifically for the interior least terns using WRP funds.

"Typically, we manage habitat for the entire ecosystem," said Travis Stoelting, manager of Goose Pond. "Tern Island is the only area of the property that is specifically managed for an individual species which is very unique."

During construction of the island, IDNR was already seeing success; the least terns made their first appearance at the Goose Pond Fish and Wildlife area in 2009.

"The day the least terns arrived on the property was June 13, 2009. We had probably the single biggest day of birding in Indiana's history because there was water in main pool west for the first time since Tern Island started construction," recalled Lee Sterrenburg, IDNR bird monitoring volunteer.

Management of least tern habitat can be a challenging endeavor and consists of maintaining nesting sites free of dense vegetation, using an electrified fence to keep predators out, manipulating water levels to establish wetland habitat during specific times of the year and employing least tern decoys to attract birds to suitable sites. Throughout the years, the least tern population has slowly but steadily increased. This summer, there were seventeen individuals on the island.

"They've really responded well to the presence of the island. We had a stellar year in 2018 with nine fledglings. That is the most we've ever had with Tern Island being on this property in Goose Pond history," said Gillet.

And the least terns' arrival isn't the only significant visitor the island has seen. Gillet says that in general, the bird response to the island and Goose Pond has been magnificent. Rare and endangered birds like the fulvous whistling duck, American golden plover, black-neck stilt, whooping crane, and roseate spoonbill, the first ever spotted in Indiana, have all made Least Tern Island their home.

"Making an open space with an island made a real big difference even before the terns got there," said Sterrenburg. "Lots of birds coming from the south – that's the first thing they see is open water even with all this vegetation around it. And when birds find this place they know immediately it's for them, they start courting immediately and they take it over."

The cumulative conservation benefits of the wetlands restored and protected through WRP, like Goose Pond, Cane Ridge, Tern Bar Slough, and Tern Island, are many and reach well beyond their boundaries. What these areas provide in flood control, wildlife habitat, scenic beauty and outdoor recreation is invaluable to the surrounding communities. These areas have been essential to increasing and stabilizing the population of the interior least terns, as well as other important species in Indiana. So much so, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service is reviewing the possibility of delisting the interior least tern due to an increase in tern numbers.

"Least Tern Island is a perfect example of 'if you build it, they will come.'" said Gillet. "It is probably one of the best places to see birds in Indiana, hands down. There's no question about that."

To learn more about Goose Pond, visit: [www.in.gov/dnr/fishwild/3094.htm](http://www.in.gov/dnr/fishwild/3094.htm)

To learn more about NRCS' wetland easement program, visit: [www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/in/programs/easements/acep/](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/in/programs/easements/acep/)