South Dakota Interior Least Tern & Piping Plover Management Plan
SD Dept. of Game Fish & Parks
Pierre, SD
2005
Wildlife Division Report 2005-02

Summary by North Dakota Department of Agriculture

The following is pertinent information regarding grazing restrictions on U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) managed land around Lake Oahe in North Dakota and the implications for least tern and piping plover habitat. In summary, USACE has grazing restrictions in place on lands leased to private landowners around Lake Oahe. USACE justifies the grazing restrictions stating that their purpose is to minimize disturbance and possible damage to nesting interior least terns (*Sterna antillarum athalassos*) and piping plovers (*Charadrius melodus*).

Following is information taken from the report regarding the two species' habitat requirements, reasons for their population decline and the effect that livestock grazing has on their nesting success.

- Least terns require sandbars with relatively small amounts of vegetation for nesting.
- Piping plovers require spacious sandy areas and alkaline wetlands during brood rearing, which is typically in May and June.
- The report found that since dam construction on major rivers, the species' decreasing populations is tied directly to how USACE has managed the water levels and other effects tied to managing waters. Dams greatly reduce the land available for nesting due to flooding. The report also states that "inappropriately" timed water releases have caused a decline in nesting success along the Missouri River.
- The report lists the two main threats to least terns as being "habitat alteration and destruction, and human disturbance". Threats to piping plovers were identified as hunting, land development, dams causing stream narrowing and disturbances from changing water levels, humans, pets and livestock.
- Of 4,645 monitored least tern nests, 10 nests (0.22%) were destroyed due to livestock. Predation accounted for the majority of nest failures.
- Of 2,564 monitored piping plover nests, 9 nests (0.31%) were destroyed due to livestock. Predation accounted for the majority of nest failures.
- Because of dam construction and changing water levels, suitable nesting habitat is lost to erosion and vegetative encroachment, which in some cases may be invasive species (e.g. Canada thistle).
- The report states that when livestock are not fenced off from suitable nesting habitat, they can disturb the adult birds and may, in some cases, trample the nests and/or young. However, this was true in a small percentage of cases according to the report.
- Part of the SD Game Fish & Parks management plan includes fencing off each problem area where least tern and piping plover nesting habitat exists. The plan includes working directly with ranchers, the USFWS Partners for Fish & Wildlife Program and the NRCS to fence problem areas and to provide water to livestock that have no alternative water source. According to the report, because of the small number of nests that are negatively impacted by livestock and the high costs of fencing, it may not be economically feasible to fence the problem areas.

The full report can be found at:

http://www.sdgfp.info/Wildlife/WildlifePlans/FinalLTPPMgmt1.pdf.