

Two Instances of Non-traditional Nesting Sites for Least Terns in Illinois With Notes on Historic and Nearby Breeding Season Occurrence

by Steven D. Bailey

Bohlen (1989) (from Hardy [1957]) lists some of the historic nesting sites for Least Tern (*Sterna antillarum*) in the state. Of those listed by Hardy, only the Bell Island site out from Pope County in the Ohio River (and technically owned by Kentucky) still has nesting Least Terns. Alexander County in southern Illinois has by far the most consistent population of nesting Least Terns in the state, at least since the early 1980s, and the tern was only sporadically reported as a nesting species before then. However, since 1985, this species has been reported every year during the breeding season in Illinois. This species was placed on the federal list of endangered species in 1985, and is also an Illinois state-endangered species (Endangered Species Protection Board 1999).

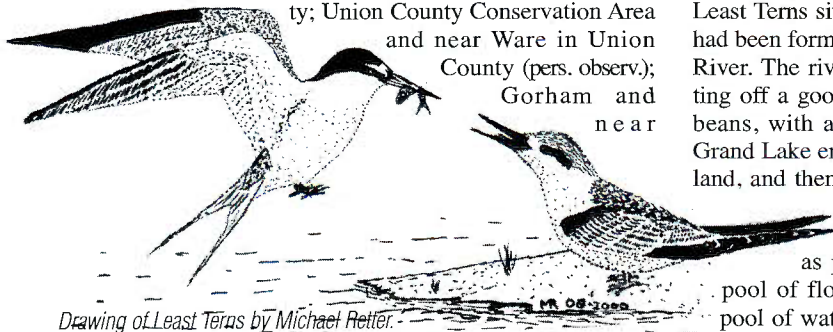
Other nesting areas that have been reported in the literature since Bohlen (1989) include several in Alexander County both at island colonies in the Mississippi River and at a few slightly inland locations. Birds and nests have also been reported several times near Grand Tower (Jackson County), although most if not all of the actual nests were placed on an island in the Mississippi River technically within the boundaries of Perry County, Missouri. Birds can often be seen feeding in the Tower Island Chute both inside and just outside the border of Illinois in Jackson County and in Perry County, Missouri. Another site where nests were recently found is just out from southwest Pope County (but again, technically on an island known as Cottonwood Bar owned by Kentucky) on 16 June 1999. In 1997, R. Renken conducted a census of the four active colonies at that time along the Mississippi River (between Cairo and Grand Tower, Illinois), and found 169 nests (2, 7, 71, and 89 per island).

Other areas (mainly in far southern Illinois) where Least Terns have been reported during the breeding season since 1985 (June-August) include near McClure, Miller City, and Horseshoe Lake Conservation Area in Alexander County; Union County Conservation Area and near Ware in Union County (pers. observ.); Gorham and near

Grand Tower in Jackson County; Wabash County near the Wabash River and just across the river from Indiana's Gibson Power Plant nesting colony; at Fort Massac S.P. and Black Bottoms (both in Massac County), just across the Ohio River from the Tennessee River mouth (nesting on an island technically owned by Kentucky); Pulaski County; near New Liberty (Pope County); Tower Rock (Hardin County); Shawneetown (Gallatin County); Baldwin Lake (Randolph County); Olney (Richland County); Newton Lake (Jasper County); Fountain Creek (Monroe County); Horseshoe S.P. (Madison County); and at Carlyle Lake and in southern Clinton County. Non-breeding summer observations have been made at Big River S.F. (Henderson County) and at Hamilton (Hancock County) on the Mississippi River, Rend Lake, Springfield (Sangamon County) in six different years, Sangchris Lake S.P. (Sangamon and Christian Counties), Goose Lake Prairie S.P. (Grundy County), Lake Calumet (Cook County), and at Waukegan (Lake County).

During the early summer of 2001, traditional tern breeding areas along the Mississippi River, especially in southern Illinois, were covered by several feet of floodwater. The interior race of the Least Tern (*Sterna albifrons athalasos*) is one species that has adapted in several ways to alterations, both natural and man-made, in its favored nesting habitat, which includes alkaline salt flats and sand, shell, or gravel sandbars in riverine situations; in Illinois those being sandbars in the Mississippi and lower Ohio Rivers.

On 8 June 2001, after learning of good numbers of Least Terns being reported earlier in southern Alexander County by Michael Retter, I decided to make a short side trip to the area after conducting a nearby bird census for the Illinois Natural History Survey. Upon arriving at the site just southwest of the tiny hamlet of Cache, along the south side of the Miller City Blacktop, I immediately saw numbers of Least Terns sitting and flying along a fair-sized sandbar that had been formed by the recent floodwaters of the Mississippi River. The river had effectively formed an "island" by cutting off a good-sized area normally planted to corn or soybeans, with a temporary outlet of water from the nearby Grand Lake encircling the cut-off piece of sandy agricultural land, and then rejoining the very high waters of the nearby Mississippi River. I counted a minimum of 45 adults, most of which were either sitting as pairs on the edge of the sandy "island" and pool of floodwater, or flying back and forth along the pool of water, several feeding in typical fashion from the



Drawing of Least Terns by Michael Retter.