

Common tern: species information for marine Special Protection Area consultations

The UK government has committed to identifying a network of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) in the marine environment by 2015. Natural England is responsible for recommending SPAs in English waters to Defra for classification. This and other related information notes have been prepared and will be available at meetings and online so that anyone who might be interested in why the SPA is being considered for classification can find out more about the birds that may be protected. For more information about the process for establishing marine SPAs see TIN120 *Establishing Marine Special Protection Areas*.

Background

The Birds Directive (EC Directive on the conservation of wild birds (2009/147/EC) requires member states to identify SPAs for:

- rare or vulnerable bird species (as listed in Annex I of the Directive); and
- regularly occurring migratory bird species.

The common tern, *Sterna hirundo*, is listed under Annex I of the Birds Directive. Also known as the sea swallow (as is the very similar arctic tern), this species is between 31 and 35 cm long and has a wingspan of 77-98 cm¹. Their typical lifespan is 12 years. The oldest recorded individual was over 33 years old².

Conservation status

- Listed in Annex 1 of EU Birds Directive (rare and vulnerable species in Europe); and
- UK amber-listed bird of conservation concern³.



Common tern in flight © Chris Gomersall (www.rspb-images.com)

Distribution and population

Common terns have a broad global distribution, breeding coastally and inland across Europe, Asia, north and west Africa, North America and the Caribbean. European birds spend the northern winter off the coast of west and southern Africa.

In the UK the common tern has a more extensive breeding distribution compared to the other tern species. It nests in a range of habitats along much of the coastline, and unlike other terns, it also regularly nests inland in the UK⁴.

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The largest common tern colony in England is currently on Coquet Island in Northumberland, where over 1,000 pairs regularly nest.

UK population

The Seabird 2000 census recorded 11,800 apparently occupied nests – 2.2% of the global population⁵. In England there were 4,676 ‘apparently occupied nests’ in 1998-2002⁶.

Breeding

Common terns can utilise a range of nesting locations. At the coast they nest in colonies of various sizes on offshore islands, sand-dunes, shingle spits and lagoon islands.

Inland, common terns nest on islands in gravel pits, lakes and reservoirs, often on floating ‘rafts’ provided specifically for them. They create a shallow ‘scrape’ on sand, shingle or within low vegetation, where 2-3 eggs are laid.

Migration/movements

Common terns are long-distance migrants that winter in the southern hemisphere. Birds generally arrive in the UK from early April onwards to breed. They have largely departed by the end of September, although birds can remain until the end of October.

Outside the breeding season, UK birds spend the northern winter along the coastline of west and south Africa, with most wintering along the shores of the Gulf of Guinea. Immature birds generally remain in Africa until their second summer, when they return to the UK⁷.

Foraging

Common terns take food from uppermost waters by plunge-diving to a depth of 1-2 m, often following hovering, or by ‘contact dipping’ where only the bill enters the water and the bird remains in flight throughout⁸. They forage alone or in small flocks.

They feed on small fish, both marine and freshwater, as well as crustaceans, terrestrial insects and occasionally squid.

They forage in a range of marine and freshwater habitats, including rivers and creeks as well as open stretches of water. During the breeding season, coastal birds are associated with shallow inshore waters such as inlets and bays.

Foraging range varies between colonies and with season. They have a smaller foraging range than the larger sandwich tern. The maximum foraging distance recorded is 30 km. The mean of all the maximum foraging ranges recorded by different studies is 15.2 km⁹.

References

- ¹ The Birds of the Western Palearctic (Snow and Perrins, 1998)
- ² BTO Bird Facts website - www.bto.org/about-birds/birdfacts
- ³ Birds of Conservation Concern 3: the population status of birds in the United Kingdom, Channel Islands and the Isle of Man (Eaton *et al*, British Birds Vol 102, 296-341)
- ⁴ The New Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland: 1988-1991 (Gibbons *et al*, 1993)
- ⁵ Seabird Populations of Britain and Ireland (Mitchell *et al*, 2004)
- ⁶ JNCC Seabird Monitoring Programme: jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-2895
- ⁷ Birds in England (Brown and Grice, 2005)
- ⁸ BirdLife International seabird wikispace – seabird.wikispaces.com/Common+Tern
- ⁹ Seabird foraging ranges as a preliminary tool for identifying candidate Marine Protected Areas (Thaxter *et al*, Biological Conservation, 2012), 2012)

Further information

Natural England Technical Information Notes are available to download from the Natural England website: www.naturalengland.org.uk. In particular see:

- TIN120: *Establishing Marine Special Protection Areas*

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For further information contact the Natural England Enquiry Service on 0300 060 0863 or e-mail enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk.

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