

Little 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 little tern, *Sterna albifrons*, is listed under Annex I of the Birds Directive. It is the smallest of the UK terns, measuring between 22 and 24 cm long with a wingspan of 48-55 cm¹. Their typical lifespan is 12 years. The oldest recorded individual was over 17 years old².

Conservation status

- SPEC3 (unfavourable conservation status in Europe)³;
- listed in Annex 1 of EU Birds Directive (rare and vulnerable species); and
- UK amber-listed bird of conservation concern⁴.



Little tern © Paul Lacey

Distribution and population

Little terns breed widely across Europe and Asia, and also in Africa and Australia⁵. They breed inland in parts of their range, but not in the UK. As with other tern species, north-west European breeding birds are likely to spend the northern winter in west African waters.

They have a wide but scattered distribution along the UK's coastline as a breeding bird. The majority are present in England with notable concentrations in East Anglia and south-east England. They are notoriously fickle, with birds shifting location from breeding

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season to breeding season and occasional abandoning colonies.

UK population

The Seabird 2000 census recorded 1,900 apparently occupied nests – 2.2% of the global population⁶. In England there were 1,521 apparently occupied nests in 1998-2002⁷. The current 5-year mean for the little tern population in the UK is 1,485 breeding pairs⁸.

Breeding

Little terns nest in smaller colonies than other terns, using sand, pebble and shingle islands, spits, bars and beaches, as well as islands within coastal lagoons. They usually settle in areas where disturbance is limited, although some colonies persist in areas with high levels of human activity where they are protected by wardening.

They excavate a scrape in areas with little or no vegetation, and often nest in close proximity to the tideline, making the nests vulnerable to being washed out by high spring tides.

Migration/movements

Little terns are long-distance migrants, arriving in the UK from April onwards and departing from August onwards. Although relatively little is known about the wintering grounds of UK little terns compared to other tern species, they appear to spend the northern winter in the coastal waters of west Africa⁹.

Foraging

Little terns plunge-dive, usually following periods of hovering, and sometimes by dipping for floating prey. They feed singly, in small parties, or in widely scattered flocks¹⁰.

They feed on small fish, often juveniles, as well as crustaceans and insects.

Little terns specialise in foraging in shallow water, often very close to the shoreline, where it uses advancing or receding tidelines, creeks, channels and sand-banks. Most foraging occurs within 1 km of the coast during the breeding season¹⁰.

Their range varies between colonies and with season. Little terns have a smaller foraging range than larger tern species, with a maximum foraging distance of 11 km recorded. The mean of all the maximum foraging ranges recorded by different studies is 6.3 km¹¹.

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 in the European Union: a status assessment (BirdLife International, 2004)

⁴ 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)

⁵ BirdLife International species factsheet: www.birdlife.org/datazone/speciesfactsheet.php?id=3276

⁶ Seabird Populations of Britain and Ireland (Mitchell *et al*, 2004)

⁷ JNCC Seabird Monitoring Programme: jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-2897

⁸ Rare breeding birds in the UK in 2010 (Holling *et al*, British Birds, Vol 105, 352-416)

⁹ Birds in England (Brown and Grice, 2005)

¹⁰ BirdLife International seabird wikispace – seabird.wikispaces.com/Little+Tern

¹¹ Seabird foraging ranges as a preliminary tool for identifying candidate Marine Protected Areas (Thaxter *et al*, Biological Conservation, 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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