

A6.92 Little Tern *Sterna albifrons*

1. Status in UK

| Biological status | | Legal status | | Conservation status | |
|-------------------|---|--|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| Breeding | ✓ | Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 | General Protection Schedule 1(1) | Species of European Conservation Concern | SPEC 3 Unfavourable conservation status (declining) but not concentrated in Europe |
| Migratory | ✓ | Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 | General Protection Schedule 1(1) | (UK) Species of Conservation Importance | Table 4 |
| Wintering | | EC Birds Directive 1979 | Annex I Migratory | All-Ireland Vertebrate Red Data Book | Vulnerable |

2. Population data

| | Population sizes (pairs) | Selection thresholds | Totals in species' SPA suite |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|--|
| GB | 2,400 | 24 | 1,616 (67% of GB population) |
| Ireland | 390 | 4 | No SPAs selected in Northern Ireland |
| Biogeographic population | 20,643 | 206 | 1,616 (8% of biogeographic population) |

GB population source: Lloyd et al. 1991

All-Ireland population source: Gibbons et al. 1993

Biogeographic population source: Hagemeyer & Blair 1997

3. Distribution

The Little Tern has a widely scattered global distribution. It breeds at middle and lower latitudes of North America, Eurasia and Australia, as well as in the sub-tropics and tropics in the Caribbean, West Africa, southern India and Sri Lanka, and south-west Asia. In much of this area, its distribution is essentially coastal, although it also occurs along major rivers such as the Niger, the Mississippi and the Danube. Seven subspecies have been described. Of these, only the nominate race *S. a. albifrons* occurs in Europe, part of a range that also extends to coastal North Africa and the Middle East, to northern Pakistan and India (Cramp 1985).

The European breeding distribution is discontinuous, but extends from the Gulf of Bothnia to the coasts of the Mediterranean and North Africa. Through much of this area, the species is restricted to the coast, although it breeds along a number of major river systems, in particular the Guadalquivir, Loire, Po, Danube, Dnepr, Volga and Vistula (Snow & Perrins 1998).

Breeding occurs at scattered colonies around much of the coast of Britain and Ireland, from the north of Scotland to the south coast of England. All British and Irish Little Terns nest on the coast, utilising sand and shingle beaches and spits, as well as tiny islets of sand or rock close inshore. The greater part of the population occurs in south and east England from Hampshire to Norfolk (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). There are small, scattered colonies on the coasts of north-east and north-west England, eastern Scotland, the Outer and Inner Hebrides, and in Wales. The Irish population is mainly found on the west and south-east coasts.

Feeding takes place close to the colony, to a maximum distance of 6 km, but not more than 1.5 km offshore (Cramp *et al.* 1974).

European breeding Little Terns move south to winter off the coast of western Africa, possibly as far as South Africa (Cramp 1985). However, most probably winter in the Gulf of Guinea, an area that has enormous resources of small fish and so attracts large numbers of terns during the northern winter.

4. Population structure and trends

Birds breeding in Britain and Ireland are part of the European biogeographic population, estimated to be 20,643–22,799 pairs (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997). The British population numbers 2,400 pairs with a further 390 pairs in the whole of Ireland (Ratcliffe *et al.* 2000). Lloyd *et al.* (1991) reported up to 70 colonies in Britain, ranging from less than ten pairs to 360 pairs (Foulness/Maplin Bank in Essex), together with about 30, mostly rather small, colonies in Ireland. Average colony size is about 30 pairs (Sears & Avery 1993).

It is believed that Little Terns declined at many British colonies during the latter part of the 19th century, but then recovered to reach a peak in the 1920s or early 1930s. Thereafter, a renewed decline set in which, while not quantifiable, was nevertheless regarded as very serious when a survey in 1967 and the subsequent census of 1969–1970 found no more than 2,000 pairs in the whole of Britain and Ireland (Cramp *et al.* 1974).

The next census took place in 1985–1987 when the total had increased to 2,430 pairs in Great Britain and 390 pairs in the whole of Ireland. The increase was unevenly spread through the range, with almost no change in Scotland (310 pairs and 370 pairs respectively), whilst the England and Wales total had increased from 1,320 pairs to 2,060 pairs. Much of the increase in England was concentrated in East Anglia and Hampshire, though some other localities on the south coast, as well as in northern England, had continued to decline. Numbers in Ireland increased from 310 to 390 pairs between the two censuses with much of this increase at a single colony in Dublin Bay (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). The population trend in Britain between 1969 and 1989, as well as changes in productivity, are examined in detail by Sears & Avery (1993). They found that there was no consistent trend in productivity over time, nor any apparent relationship between productivity and population trends. Productivity is not related to colony size and some Little Tern colonies are consistently more productive than others.

Elsewhere in Europe, the pattern has followed that in Britain, with a long-term decline until the 1970s. Since then, there has been some recovery, especially in France and Belgium, though there have been continued local declines in The Netherlands, Germany, Denmark and around the Baltic (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997). Ringing has shown fairly extensive interchange between colonies, at least by first-time breeders, with birds reared in British colonies breeding in Denmark and Germany, and a German-ringed bird breeding in England (Cramp 1985).

The greatest threat to Little Tern colonies is from human disturbance. The concentration of the largest colonies on beaches in south-east England coincides with the highest density of

people living in Britain and wanting to use those same beaches. The period of greatest decline, from the 1930s to the 1960s, coincided with a great boom in numbers of people making trips to the seaside, with only a short respite during the war years. Once alerted by the 1967 census to the seriousness of the situation, protection measures, including wardening, signs and fencing, have had remarkable success in safeguarding a number of colonies, with considerable increases in numbers of nesting pairs at several sites in both Britain and Ireland. Predation is a factor at some colonies and fencing is widely used to keep out Red Foxes *Vulpes vulpes*. High summer tides (especially storm-surges) regularly flood some colonies, but nests have successfully been moved up the beach in some places. Blown sand is also a significant factor causing nest losses.

5. Protection measures for population in the UK

SPA suite

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Little Terns supports, on average, 1,676 pairs. This amounts to about 67% of the British breeding population, and about 8% of the international population. The species does not regularly breed in significant numbers in Northern Ireland. The SPA suite contains 27 sites (Table 6.92.1) where Little Tern has been listed as a qualifying species.

6. Classification criteria

All sites in the UK that were known to support more than 1% of the national Little Tern breeding population were considered under Stage 1.1, and all were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements.

The sites within the suite are distributed throughout the UK breeding range, from sites on the east coast of Scotland, to the west, east and south coasts of England. Most sites are multi-species SPAs, of importance also for a range of other breeding seabirds, although Great Yarmouth North Denes has been selected solely for its importance for breeding Little Terns. The colony breeding at Pagham Harbour has a long history of occupation, occurs in natural habitat and forms part of the core range of Little Terns on the south coast of England. It has suffered recent declines owing to disturbance, high spring tides and possible predation. To ensure continued protection of the habitat supporting this breeding colony, Pagham Harbour was selected under Stage 1.4.

There is a very long recorded history of occupancy at some of these SPAs with records from the 19th century for a few sites (Holloway 1996). However, the historical impacts of disturbance, habitat change and past persecution mean that the locations of many colonies have changed.

Distribution map for Little Tern SPA suite

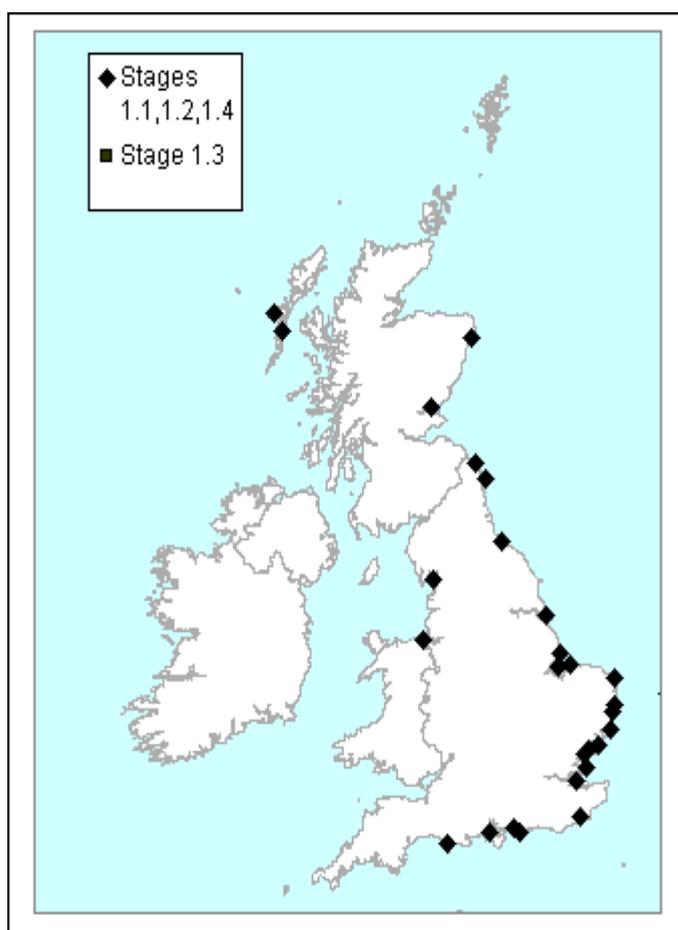


Table 6.92.1 – SPA suite

| Site name | Site total | % of biogeographical population | % of national population | Selection stage |
|-----------------------------------|------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Alde-Ore Estuary | 48 | 0.2 | 2.0 | 1.1 |
| Benacre to Easton Bavents | 53 | 0.3 | 2.2 | 1.1 |
| Blackwater Estuary | 36 | 0.2 | 1.5 | 1.1 |
| Chesil Beach and The Fleet | 55 | 0.3 | 2.3 | 1.1 |
| Chichester and Langstone Harbours | 100 | 0.5 | 4.2 | 1.1 |
| Colne Estuary | 38 | 0.2 | 1.6 | 1.1 |
| Dungeness to Pett Level | 35 | 0.2 | 1.5 | 1.1 |
| Firth of Tay and Eden Estuary | 44 | 0.2 | 1.8 | 1.1 |
| Foulness | 24 | 0.1 | 1.0 | 1.1 |
| Gibraltar Point | 23 | 0.1 | 1.0 | 1.1 |
| Great Yarmouth North Denes | 220 | 1.1 | 9.2 | 1.1 |
| Hamford Water | 55 | 0.3 | 2.3 | 1.1 |
| Humber Flats, Marshes and Coast | 63 | 0.3 | 2.6 | 1.1 |

| Site name | Site total | % of biogeographical population | % of national population | Selection stage |
|--|-------------------|--|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| Lindisfarne | 38 | 0.2 | 1.6 | 1.1 |
| Medway Estuary and Marshes | 28 | 0.1 | 1.2 | 1.1 |
| Minsmere – Walberswick | 28 | 0.1 | 1.2 | 1.1 |
| Monach Isles | 26 | 0.1 | 1.1 | 1.1 |
| Morecambe Bay | 26 | 0.1 | 1.1 | 1.1 |
| North Norfolk Coast | 377 | 1.8 | 15.7 | 1.1 |
| Northumbria Coast | 40 | 0.2 | 1.7 | 1.1 |
| Pagham Harbour | 12 | <0.1 | 0.5 | 1.4 |
| Solent and Southampton Water | 49 | 0.2 | 2.0 | 1.1 |
| South Uist Machair and Lochs | 31 | 0.2 | 1.3 | 1.1 |
| Teesmouth and Cleveland Coast | 37 | 0.2 | 1.5 | 1.1 |
| The Dee Estuary | 56 | 0.3 | 2.3 | 1.1 |
| The Wash | 33 | 0.2 | 1.4 | 1.1 |
| Ythan Estuary, Sands of Forvie and Meikle Loch | 41 | 0.2 | 1.7 | 1.1 |

| | | | |
|---------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| TOTALS | 1,616 | 7.8% | 67.3% |
|---------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|