

CLEVELAND LITTLE TERN PROJECT

2008 REPORT



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The Little Tern project is co-ordinated by INCA.

The Little Tern project is funded through and by INCA.

INCA organises the wardening of the site, provides the equipment necessary, arranges for the site to be fenced and produces the annual report and press coverage to assist the conservation of this rare nesting bird.

FUNDING

The costs of wardening the Crimdon site in 2008 were met from landfill tax credits provided by **Able UK Ltd.**

Photographs by Harry Brenkley

INTRODUCTION

Little Terns, *Sterna albifrons*, have nested around Teesmouth for at least 100 years. They had traditionally nested on the south side of the river in an area of Coatham Sands known as The Ducky. In the mid 1990s there was a mass movement of birds to Crimdon Denemouth, on the Durham/Hartlepool boundary, and it is here that they nested again this year. For the first time in many years no birds were reported to have attempted to nest at Coatham or Seaton Snook this year.

The birds arrive in April and, after a brief courtship, lay a clutch of up to three eggs in a shallow scrape in the sand. The nest on the foreshore is usually just above the high tide line and debris on the beach is used as landmarks to the nest site and as shelter for eggs and chicks. Incubation is shared by both adults and takes twenty one days. The young are active within a few days and seek shelter amongst the debris on the beach. Adults return with food but soon the young venture down to the waters edge and start to supplement their food supply themselves. Twenty one days after hatching the chicks start to fledge, fly and become difficult to distinguish from the adult birds. The return flight to West Africa usually begins towards the end of August.

The UK breeding population continues to decline in line with European and international trends. Recent estimates are for there to be about 1200 breeding pairs in the UK. With the longevity of the adult terns the recent years of very poor reproductive success nationally have yet to be reflected in the local adult population.

Over the past ten years there have been over 140 birds spending the summer in the Teesmouth area with a maximum of 65 pairs nesting. With the recent years of poor breeding success not only has the number of pairs nesting declined but the number of individuals observed in the area has also declined.

SUMMARY

Once again a large number of volunteers from Durham Heritage Coast, Durham County Council, Easington District Council, Hartlepool Borough Council, Natural England Castle Eden Dene, National Trust and INCA turned out to assist in erecting the fence on the morning of the 7th May. We were favoured by fine sunny weather, the whole job was completed in three hours and the birds started to roost within the area that same evening.

In spite of being hit by a string of losses through predation the Little Terns nesting at Crimdon Denemouth have bucked the national trend and had a successful year.

By early June lots of birds were sitting on eggs and numbers continued to rise beyond 60 prompting the INCA Warden Trevor Stephenson to risk suggesting that we may exceed our previous record of 65 nesting pairs. What is that saying about counting chickens

On 13 June eggs were being lost from the site and overnight vigils revealed Hedgehogs as the culprits. After a few sleepless nights eight Hedgehogs had been re-housed in other parts of County Durham but we were down to as little as 23 birds sitting. As this was early in the season many of our birds re-laid and perhaps other birds which had failed elsewhere joined in but by now things were getting confusing with young chicks running around the beach amongst birds sitting on new eggs. Then the Kestrel arrived

An old female bird decided that Little Tern chicks were easy prey and took to feeding across the site on a regular basis. Providing day old hen chicks as an alternative food source proved ineffective and all was gloom when the Kestrel was seen on one occasion to take five chicks in forty minutes. Then the Foxes arrived

A family of two adult and two cubs were seen in Crimdon Dene on a number of occasions and it was expected that they would eventually find the colony and

make short shrift of the remaining eggs and chicks. Over a couple of weeks two of the animals were seen dead on the main road and one of the adults was dispatched by a local farmer when it ventured too near his chicken hutch. Meanwhile the Kestrel moved on and the Little Terns had a brief respite to get on with raising their young ... and then the Peregrine Falcon arrived

To be fair the Peregrine was hunting along the Durham Coast and was not seen to manage to take any of the Little Terns which have the advantage over many birds of being able to take refuge under water.

As a result of all this disturbance the adults birds were spending less and less time on the beach only returning briefly to feed chicks. At times one would not have thought there was a colony there at all but carefully monitoring and counting the chicks as the adults returned to feed them showed that there were still a large number of chicks around and gradually numbers of chicks fledged and flying with their parents rose to 67 which is very satisfactory and amazing given the level of predation.

WARDENING AND MANAGEMENT AT CRIMDON DENEMOUTH

Trevor Stephenson once more agreed to act as volunteer co-ordinator and warden for 2008 on an expenses paid basis.

Durham Heritage Coast provided a hut as a base for the wardening activity adjacent to the site and Easington District Council agreed the temporary erection of it.

The site was fenced on 7th May using eight, fifty metre rolls of wire pig netting fencing which had been donated by Durham Heritage Coast in 2005. Strands of baler twine were then placed above the netting with corks and tape used on the top strand along the eastern boundary to prevent collision. A second fence of baler twine was installed and set a few metres off to prevent people walking up to and along the fence line thereby disturbing the birds.

With the weather being predominantly cold and wet for a large part of the season the hut provided much needed shelter and refreshment for the warden, volunteers and visitors. It is likely that the number of volunteers and time spent volunteering would have been greatly reduced had the hut not been available. The presence of volunteers on site not only provides valuable information on the terns and protects them from disturbance and harm but it also reduces the amount of antisocial behaviour in Denemouth and on the beach.

After the predation by Hedgehogs and Kestrel in mid June the behaviour of the Little Terns appeared to change with the adult birds spending far less time than normal on the beach and only returning to feed the chicks. This led to serious problems in estimating the number of chicks remaining. Only when the birds started to fledge did they become more easily seen and in turn counted.

DIARY OF THE SEASON

May 7 Fence erected - 22 Little Tern were seen on site that evening
May 13 40 Little Tern on site
May 15 50 Little Tern on site
May 18 60 Little Tern on site
May 20 60 Little Tern on site
May 21 70 Little Tern on site
May 22 1 Little Tern sitting
May 24 3 Little Tern sitting
May 25 5 Little Tern sitting
May 27 11 Little Tern sitting
May 28 16 Little Tern sitting
May 30 34 Little Tern sitting
May 31 43 Little Tern sitting
June 4 51 Little Tern sitting
June 7 53 Little Tern sitting
June 8 63 Little Tern sitting
June 13 27 Little Tern sitting - 2 chicks seen
8 Hedgehogs removed from colony
June 20 Kestrel seen taking 3 Little Tern chicks
June 23 23 Little Tern sitting - Kestrel seen taking 3 Little Tern chicks
June 25 attempt to feed Kestrel with day old chicks
June 26 13 Little Tern sitting - Kestrel seen taking 1 Little Tern chick
June 27 Kestrel seen taking 1 Little Tern chicks
June 29 17 Little Tern sitting
July 1 17 Little Tern sitting
July 4 25 Little Tern sitting
July 9 Over 100 Little Terns on site
July 10 13 Little Tern sitting 2 fledgling
July 13 13 Little Tern sitting 25 chicks counted plus 2 fledglings
July 15 13 Little Tern sitting
July 17 Kestrel seen taking 1 Little Tern chick
July 20 31 chicks counted
July 23 2 hedgehogs removed from site
July 30 39 fledglings seen
3 August 52 fledglings seen Kestrel seen taking 1 Little Tern chick
4 August 47 fledglings seen
8 August confirmed count of 52 fledglings and 10 chicks (5 chicks previously fledged) = 67
August 12 24 fledglings on sandbar and 5 seen on site
Peregrine falcon trying to take Little Tern at sea
September 10 fence taken down

WEATHER

May and June saw unseasonable conditions with cold winds from a northerly quarter often accompanied by rain and fog. July and August were somewhat warmer but conditions remained very changeable with frequent, long wet periods. Whilst these conditions did not seem particularly favourable to the birds incubating and feeding they were also not very favourable to human beach users meaning that the levels of disturbance were less than in hot summers.

DISTURBANCE

As has been mentioned above the weather put something of a dampener on the usual Bank Holiday and summer visitors.

The most common disturbance this year was from dogs and dog walkers. Recent changes to the adjacent caravan sites have meant a much larger use by holiday makers who bring their dogs and walk them on the beach. The difference between these “dog walkers” and local “dog walkers” is the turn over. Talk to a local “dog walker” and he understands the need to prevent disturbance and is likely to become an ally for ever more. The holiday makers change every week and each new batch needs to be informed of the likely disturbance they and their dogs can cause making the task endless.

Incidents with drunken youths, air rifles and motorcycles were down on previous years and only one motorcycle incident was actually targeted at the Little Terns.

Engineering works along the shore to the north necessitated a JCB to be driven around the colony twice a day for a period during the nesting season but liaison with the contractors prevented any harm or significant disturbance from this activity.

PREDATION

The loss of large numbers of clutches of eggs over the period 12 -13 June caused serious concern until the cause was found and over two nights eight Hedgehogs were removed from the colony. Once alerted to the danger of Hedgehogs a further 2 animals were removed later in the season.

A lone Kestrel arrived in the area in late June and intermittently over a number of days took a significant number of chicks.

Fox were sighted in Crimdon Dene in late June but were killed on the road or shot by a neighbouring farmer without becoming a problem.

The Peregrine Falcon, which nested further north on the Durham Coast was seen to be trying to take adult terns late in the season but did not become an issue.



OTHER TEESMOUTH SITES

Coatham

There were no reports of Little Terns attempting to nest at Coatham this season.

Seaton Snook

One pair of Little Terns was seen to be nesting at Seaton Snook. Young chicks were seen on 16th June but neither adults nor chicks were seen a few days later suggesting predation had occurred.