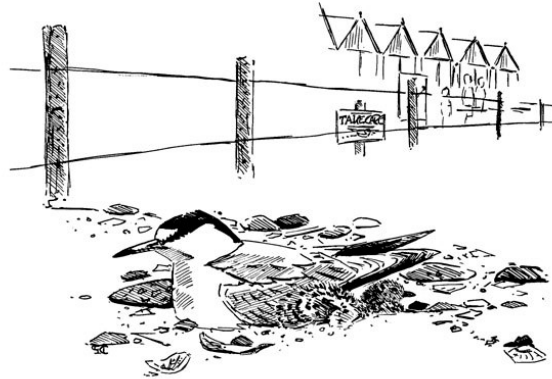


SUFFOLK LOCAL BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN

Little tern

(Sterna albifrons)



Dan Powell

The little tern nests on beaches and so is vulnerable to disturbance, predation, and the effects of sea level rise. Suffolk has lost a staggering 88% of its breeding little terns in just 19 years. The long-term aim of this local plan is to restore the Suffolk population to the levels of the late 1980s. Actions will include: setting up a Little Tern Group, and network of local champions, to protect the beach colonies from disturbance and predation; informing beach users, and coastal managing authorities, about little terns; and providing safer island nesting sites in lagoons and sheltered coastal waters.

1 Definition

The little tern is the smallest of five species of tern breeding around the British coast. It usually nests on beaches and lagoon islands of shingle, sand, or shells; sometimes only metres from the high tide mark. This makes them susceptible to predation, human disturbance, and tidal inundation. Their nesting strategy is to breed in small, single species colonies that are abandoned when predation becomes too great; food becomes scarce; or more recently, when human disturbance becomes too great. The nest is an unlined scrape in which 1-3 camouflaged eggs are laid. Incubation is around 18-22 days, and the chicks fledge in 19-20 days. Little terns feed on small fish and crustaceans caught inshore, and occasionally from coastal freshwater bodies. They winter off the west coast of Africa.

2 Current status: national, regional, and local

About 10% of the European Union population breed around the British coast, concentrated in areas that have suitable beaches. East Anglia is the UK stronghold, supporting almost half of the UK population.

Declines in the UK population were noted in the late 1960s. This prompted greater protection of colonies, and by the late 70s, most colonies received some sort of management. The population rose to a peak of 2575 in the mid 80s but this peak has not been sustained. By 2000, it had declined by 24% to 2084 pairs.

The East Anglian population declined by a comparable 20%: but protection work in Norfolk has masked a larger decline of 61% in the Suffolk population. The Suffolk population now appears to be in free-fall, and just 43 pairs nested in 2005. **Suffolk has lost 88% of its breeding little terns in just 19 years.** The mean number of young fledged has halved over the same period, and is now about 0.22 young fledged per breeding pair (this is a third of the figure of 0.67 per breeding pair calculated to be necessary to maintain a stable population).

Year	UK Population		East Anglian Population		Suffolk Population	
	Count	% Change	Count	% Change	Count	% Change
1969	1602		659		80	
Mid 80s	2575	+61%	1256	+91%	378	+370%
2000	1947	-24%	1010	-20%	148	-61%
2005	1134	-42%	533	-47%	43	-71%

The little tern is protected under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981), which makes it an offence to disturb the birds or their dependant young at the nest. It is listed on Annex 1 of the EC Birds Directive and under Appendix 2 of the Berne Directive, which require the UK government to safeguard the little terns' nesting and feeding habitats.

The little tern is on the amber list of Birds of Conservation Concern, because it has an internationally important population in the UK; it has a localised population; and its population has declined moderately (by more than 25% but less than 50% in 25 years).

The little tern is not a national UK BAP species. It has been identified as a Suffolk character species because Suffolk has a large proportion of the UK population; the rapid decline of the Suffolk population; and its strong association with vegetated shingle (a European priority habitat under Annex 1 of the EU Habitats Directive, and a UK biodiversity priority habitat).

3 Current factors affecting little terns

Disturbance: Little tern colonies are very vulnerable to human disturbance. Walkers, fishermen, holidaymakers, dogs, motorbikes, four-wheel drive vehicles, quad bikes, helicopters, beach-fishermen, and egg collectors all pose a threat.

Predation: Almost anything seems to prey on little terns. However, the main culprits are foxes, rats, birds of prey, gulls and corvids. The natural defence of little terns is to live in ephemeral colonies. Colonies are often successful in their first few years, but local predators soon learn to exploit them. When predation gets too high, the terns move on, if they can find a new site.

Sea level Rise/Coastal squeeze: Climate change is eroding many of Suffolk's beaches and squeezing them against sea defences. The future management of the coastline and estuaries will be determined through the Suffolk Coastal Shoreline Management Plan and Suffolk Estuarine Strategy. It is likely that coastal realignment and other engineering works will be necessary in the future, and these have the potential for creating new suitable habitat for little tern colonies.

Bad weather: Productivity can be reduced by bad weather, or surge tides: killing chicks, or by forcing adults to abandon eggs or chicks.

Lack of coordinated effort: The mobile nature of the little tern’s nesting strategy requires a countywide or regional response. Efforts must be flexible enough to move with the little terns to ensure that the best protection is given to each colony in its early, most productive years.

Food supply: The amount of food, how it varies along the coast, and whether it varies between seasons or years is not known. It may be a limiting factor determining where and when colonies are established and abandoned.

Expansion of Open Access designated land: The government intends to expand the land designated as Open Access Land under the Countryside Rights Of Way Act (2000) to include the whole of the UK coast. This could increase the disturbance to little tern colonies and reduce the ability to protect them.

4 Current action

Disturbance/predation: reserve staff usually fence off colonies on nature reserves. The fence varies, from a string fence with some signs to prevent human disturbance, to an electric fence to deter ground predators and dogs as well. Some fencing occurs at one or two colonies on public beaches.

The Suffolk Connect Scheme, purchased equipment for two electric ‘flying’ fences in 2005, for use anywhere in Suffolk.

Lack of coordinated effort: the Connect purchase is the first step towards a coordinated effort to protect colonies throughout Suffolk.

Colonies are monitored and records sent to County Bird Recorders.

Sea level Rise/Coastal squeeze: little has been done to create new island colonies, although awareness is building amongst coastal management bodies.

Food supply: little is known about food availability along the Suffolk coast.

Expansion of Open Access designated land: the need to protect little tern colonies is being included, in consultation responses to the government’s proposals for Coastal Open Access land.

5 Targets

As a minimum, maintain existing 2005 population of little tern.

Increase the number of potential colonies to 10 by 2010 (15 by 2015, 20 by 2020).

Increase population to 100 nesting pairs by 2010 (200 by 2015, 350 by 2020).

6 Actions

Action	Date	Partners
Policy & Legislation		
Highlight the importance of all potential colonies in local planning documents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suffolk Coastal Local Development Framework • Suffolk Subcell 3c Shoreline Management Plan • Stour/Orwell Estuary Strategy • Deben Estuary Strategy • Alde-Ore Estuary Strategy • Blyth Estuary Strategy 	2006, 2010	DCs, SCC, NE

Enforce protective legislation, and develop links with Police Wildlife Liaison Officers.	2006-2010	RSPB, SWT, NT, NE, DCs
Ensure safeguards in future CROW Act revisions.	2006-7	NE, RSPB, SWT, NT
Ensure that biodiversity enhancements are incorporated, where flood defence schemes are bought forward <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minsmere EA Sea Defence Strategy • Walberswick-Dunwich EA Sea Defence Strategy 	2006-2010	EA, DCs, RSPB, SWT, NT
Species management and protection		
Establish a two-tier Suffolk Little Tern Group in 2006: a small team of site managers to monitor colonies, administer 'flying fences' and encourage local support and colony 'champions'; and a larger team to raise funds, and raise awareness.	2006	RSPB, SWT, NE, SCHU, EA
In 2006, establish a supply of fencing materials and shelters that can be deployed quickly anywhere in the county, sufficient to protect four colonies.	2006 2007	RSPB, NT, SCHU.
Achieve external funding to fund a seasonal Suffolk Little Tern Warden to start in 2007 to implement colony protection while tern numbers are critically low, and establish a network of colony champions to take over these duties in the longer term.	2007 - 2010	SCHU, RSPB, NT, SWT, DCs, SCC.
Look for opportunities to put nesting rafts on sheltered waters implement where suitable.	2007 - 2010	RSPB, NT, SWT, NE
Research and monitoring		
Undertake a desk survey to collate current data for example Harwich and Haven report includes detailed fisheries data which may inform below. Include data search for little tern in rest of the world especially other known colonies on the North Sea.	2007	RSPB, UEA, CEFAS.
Survey the food supply along the Suffolk coast to assess general levels of food available to little terns and identify hot spots.	2008	NE, UEA, CEFAS.
Ensure consistent monitoring of colony size and productivity. Send results to national coordinator and assess results in conjunction with Norfolk and Essex colonies.	2006- 2010	SWT.
Study the historic colonies to look at productivity changes and identify possible	2006	SWT, RSPB, NT, SBRC.

reasons for abandonment.		
Advisory		
Continue to raise awareness with local police forces and community liaison officers.	2007	SCHU, SWT, RSPB, NT and DCs.
Advise Environment Agency and local authorities on measures to protect existing colonies, and opportunities to create new ones through Coastal/Estuary Management Schemes.	2006/7	SCHU, RSPB, NT,SWT, DCs.
Liase with Harwich and Felixstowe Port Authorities, so that any capital dredgings (such as Bathside Bay) can be used to create nesting islands in suitable sheltered locations (NB maintenance dredgings are too fine to be used).	2007	SCHU, EA, SWT, RSPB
Communications and publicity		
Investigate in advance the possibility of “dog free family beaches” if little tern colony arrives.	2007	DC, SCHU, RSPB, NT, SWT
Raise awareness and guidance with locals, and beach user-groups eg fishermen: members of SLTG to address two user groups each year, and write one article for a user group publication each year.	2007-2010	SCHU, SWT, NT, RSPB, DCs
Develop new interpretation boards including BAP coastal vegetated shingle and little tern; prioritise sites without existing interpretation liase between needed between partners.	2007/8	SCHU, DCs, SCC, SWT, RSPB, NT, NE
Develop a SLTG generic sign to be used by all partners, with some basic LT facts to be used with fencing near colonies.	2007	RSPB, NT, SCHU, SWT
Raise general levels of awareness through local press and generate two press releases each year.	2006-2010	SCHU, SWT, NT, RSPB, DCs
Encourage local residents to become colony or area champions, develop suitable training and work with SCHU Volunteer Ranger scheme to develop champions.	2006-2010	SCHU, RSPB, SWT, NT, DCs.

NB Where achieve by dates are 2006-2010 this means they need to be achieved or worked towards by 2006 and annually renewed until 2010.

Monitoring of progress:

Reported annually on the UK BAP reporting system BARS Biodiversity Action Reporting system.

Constraints to plan implementation:

Some of the actions are dependant upon achieving successful external funding, a fundraising steering group has been set up and it is anticipated that little tern will be part of a bid in early 2007 that will also highlight and implement action for the Habitat Action Plan for Coastal Vegetated Shingle, that the species is strongly associated with.

List of organisations that have been consulted regarding this plan and have agreed to aim to deliver their organisations commitments:

SWT Mick Wright
RSPB Ian Paradine and Robin Harvey
NE Richard Rafe and Adam Burrows
NT Grant Lohoar
SCHU Simon Hooton
Suffolk Coastal District Council John Davies
SCC Sue Hooton
EA Merle Leeds and Madeline Fallon
Suffolk Biodiversity Partnership Officer Mary Norden

Published December 2006.