

CLEVELAND LITTLE TERN PROJECT 2006 REPORT

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INDUSTRY NATURE CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

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 2006 were met from landfill tax credits provided by **Able UK Ltd** and a donation from **English Nature**.

Home Housing produced a leaflet which was used to inform the public and local residents of the situation with little terns on the beach at Crimdon.

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 attempted to nest again this year. Some birds nested at Coatham and some also nested at Seaton Snook north of Seal Sands.

The birds nest on the foreshore just above the high tide line using debris on the beach as landmarks to their nest site and as shelter for eggs and chicks. 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. Incubation is shared by both adults and takes 21 days. The young are active within a few days and seek shelter amongst 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. Within a further 21 days the chicks 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 at about 1200 breeding pairs in the UK. With the longevity of the adult terns the recent years of very poor reproductive success 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 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

The season started as normal with terns arriving on Teesside at the end of April. This year the protective fence was greatly improved by the donation of wire pig netting fencing by Durham Heritage Coast. Whilst this undoubtedly offered a substantial improvement on the previous baler twine strand fence it did require considerably more effort to install. We were grateful to the large number of volunteers from Durham Heritage Coast, Durham County Council, Hartlepool Borough Council, English Nature Castle Eden Dene, National Trust and INCA who turned out to assist on the morning of the 3rd May. We were favoured by fine sunny weather and in spite of our worries the whole job was completed in three hours.

Although little terns were seen at Crimdon from the beginning of May numbers remained low and fluctuated daily with a maximum of 31 but some days passed without any birds being seen in the area.

Early June saw small numbers of birds showing an interest in nesting with nine birds sitting at the start of the month but this only rose to thirteen by the end in spite of their being over fifty birds on site at times. Early laying produced five fledglings by 26th. The warm sunny weather of July saw the number of pairs nesting rise with 22 birds sat on eggs by the 8th. Numbers of little tern using the area also rose to a peak of 83 by the end of the month.

It is estimated that by the end of the season 25 pairs of birds nested with four clutches of eggs being lost, 37 chicks were hatched and fledged of which 32 were ringed. Whilst overall numbers of birds visiting the site and nesting is substantially down on previous years the success in raising young is the best result since 2003.

Six chicks are also thought to have been raised from around seven nests at Seaton Snook.

WARDENING AND MANAGEMENT AT CRIMDON DENEMOUTH

Trevor Stephenson once more agreed to act as volunteer co-ordinator and warden for 2006 on an expenses paid basis.

The site was fenced on 3rd May using eight, fifty metre rolls of wire pig netting fencing which had been donated by Durham Heritage Coast. 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.

Little tern were seen on site that evening.

Over the following weeks little tern numbers fluctuated widely with some days passing where no birds were seen on the site

May 6	7 little tern on site
May 10	31 little tern on site
May 12	7 little tern on site
May 12-20	very low numbers
May 21	28 little tern on site
June 4	9 little tern were observed on site making scrapes
June 7	38 little tern observed on foreshore
June 9	28 little tern observed on foreshore
June 11	2 little tern sitting
June 12	3 little tern sitting and 3 more making scrapes
June 14	6 little tern sitting on eggs
June 15	8 little tern sitting on eggs
June 19	9 little tern sitting on eggs
June 23	10 little tern sitting on eggs
June 24	11 little tern sitting on eggs, 44 observed on the site
June 26	5 fledglings observed, 40 little tern observed on site
June 27	52 little tern observed on site
June 29	13 little tern nesting
July 5	17 little tern nesting
July 8	22 little tern nesting, 10 chicks rung to date
July 11	17 chicks rung to date
July 12	21 chicks rung to date
July 13	50+ little tern observed on site
July 14	19 chicks rung to date
July 17	21 chicks rung to date, 70+ little tern observed site
July 19	26 chicks rung to date, 60 – 70 little tern observed on site
July 28	28 chicks rung to date, 6 fledged birds observed
July 25	30 chicks rung to date, 83 little tern observed on site
July 28	32 chicks rung to date, possibly 5 chicks not rung

WEATHER

For once the weather was favourable this year for the terns to both incubate and raise their young. Conditions turned warm and sunny in the latter half of June and July went on to become one of the warmest and sunniest on record. Warm weather not only helped with incubation and survival of the chicks but the calm weather and warm sea seems to have enabled good fishing resulting in an incredible survival rate amongst the chicks. It was suggested at one stage that the chicks would have to run around on the beach to loose enough weight to be able to fly. Adult birds were often seen panting because of the heat.

DISTURBANCE

27th May a car was driven onto the northern end of the beach and burned out. This proved difficult to retrieve and, after many attempts, it was not finally removed until June 5th.

2 June saw three youths deliberately start a fire in the marram grass dunes north of the colony. The police were called and a registration number provided. The fire was extinguished by the warden and Mark from Pony World before the fire brigade arrived.

The season was characterised by a huge increase in visitors which is thought to have resulted from investment and promotion of the adjacent caravan site. Many of these visitors had dogs and, because of the regular turn over, there was a constant need to ask people to restrain their dogs and keep away from the colony. A loud hailer proved useful in attracting attention and saved a lot of chasing around on the beach. The warden and volunteers could sit at a distance and still address people who were approaching too close. The noise did not seem to disturb the birds.

In an effort to stem the disturbance the leaflets printed by Home Housing were distributed to all the caravans and a large stock placed in their offices.

Later in the season a second baler twine fence was effected on the eastern side of the colony as the chicks tend to leave the area and head down the beach to the tide line. This second fence was to provide more area in which the chicks could sit and not be trampled and would keep people and dogs further away. It would be ideal but impossible to fence an area all the way down to the sea to allow the chicks free movement between the nest site and the tide line.

PREDATION

Fox activity was heavy around Crimdon Dene and the denemouth all winter. A vixen was removed from the area in March. A pair of foxes at Blackhall Rocks had cubs in April but did not seem to hunt this far south.

A pair of crows nested in the eastern end of the dene and took plover eggs early in June but as little tern numbers increased they were repeatedly driven off and eventually chose to forage elsewhere. With the sunny weather it is likely that the crows found sufficient pickings from scraps left by visitors.

Kestrel visited the site in late June and sat for long periods on one of the fence posts. There was little reaction from the little terns and it was thought that this could become a serious problem but with so few chicks hatched at that stage the bird eventually moved on.

OTHER TEESMOUTH SITES

Coatham

Ian Batty visited the South Gare - Coatham area on a number of occasions in May and June. Although little tern were observed fishing in the area there were no signs of attempted nesting in what had been their traditional site. This could be the first year since records began that no terns have attempted to nest on this site. This could be due to the drastic reduction in numbers visiting Teesmouth.

Seaton Snook

There were reports in early June of little tern at Seaton Snook. There have been attempts at nesting in this location for a number of years. The location is remote and because of this probably less disturbed than other sites but the area available for nesting is fairly restricted. Hartlepool Wardens Service have maintained a fence around the nest site for a number of years and a number of ringed plover nests are protected in this way.

With the main centre of activity at Crimdon the Seaton Snook site is not regularly visited and so an accurate record cannot be provided. On 7th June there were seven little tern seen to be sitting and a further 18 in the area. Numbers sitting fluctuated over the next four weeks but it is thought that six chicks were fledged from this site.