The decline of Little Terns in Britain and Ireland

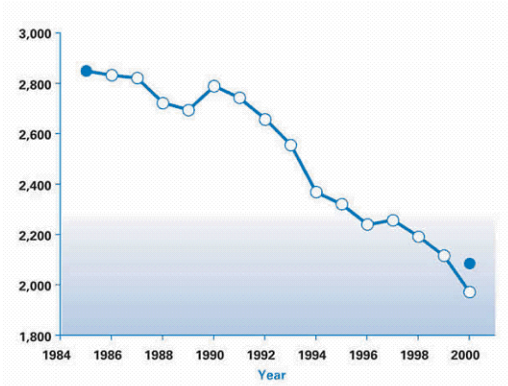
Little Terns in Britain and Ireland declined by 27% from 2,850 pairs to 2,085 pairs between the comprehensive 1985-87 Seabird Colony Register (SCR) and the 1999-2001 Seabird 2000 surveys.

Data from annual counts at a sample of colonies (containing about 65% of the national total) demonstrate a long-term chronic decline at a rate of around 1.5% per annum. Reduced productivity is the most likely explanation for the population decline. Estimates of productivity have been very variable and at or below that required to maintain a stable population for over a decade.

A simple population model using these variable annual productivity estimates, but constant survival rates, predicts the decline between the two surveys reasonably accurately. Increased Fox predation is the most likely cause of the reduction in productivity. There is little support for the widely held belief that vulnerability of Little Terns to Foxes has increased owing to them being concentrated into fewer, larger colonies.

The frequency distribution of colonies of varying sizes did not change during the period of decline, and there is no relationship between productivity and population size. It is more likely that the population and range of Foxes has increased.

Game Conservancy data show Fox populations have increased by about 400% since 1960. Conservation of Little Terns at Rye Harbour depends on reducing rates of fox predation with electric fencing. This benefits several other scarce ground nesting birds including Ringed Plover, Oystercatcher, Lapwing, Redshank, Skylark, Wheatear, Yellow Wagtail and Grey Partridge.



Model (open circles) of little tern population trend (number of pairs in Britain and Ireland), 1985–2000. Adult survival (assumed 0.89), survival to recruitment (0.33) and age of first breeding (three years) were held constant, but productivity allowed to vary. The filled circles are the Little Tern's actual population size (from SCR and Seabird 2000).

The Little Tern at Rye Harbour

Friends of Rye Harbour Nature Reserve

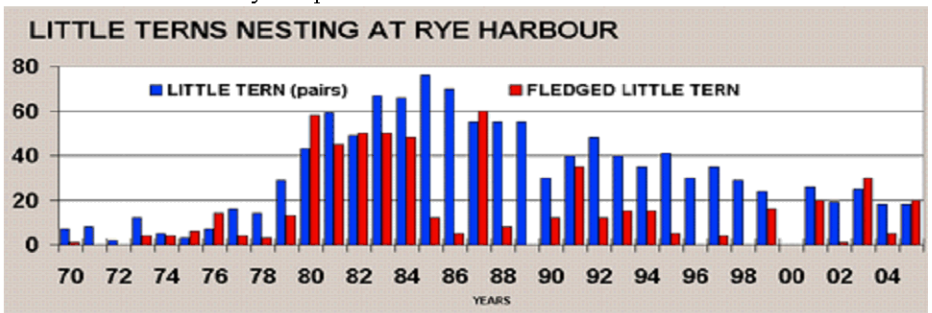
Common summer visitor and passage migrant, bred annually, but not in 2000. This is the only colony in Sussex.

The first few return during mid April. Good numbers are present from late April until July or early August, with small numbers usually noted until about mid September.

The Little Tern is a notoriously unsuccessful breeder, and the colony at Rye Harbour is no exception. In only 11 out of the 30 years 1970-1999 have the number of fledged young per pair exceeded 0.5 – the number considered necessary for a population to sustain itself. Predation by Fox, Badger, Little Owl and Kestrel are the primary causes of failure.

The 2 or 3 eggs are laid on the bare shingle and rely upon their camouflage. The tiny chicks hatch after 20 days. When small, the chicks are brooded by one parent, while the other is off catching small silver fish that are brought back, one at a time, for the chicks. As the chicks grow they are left alone, so that both parents can go fishing, and they hide from predators in the vegetation such as the Sea Kale. We supplement these hiding places with wooden chick shelters that are used to escape the heat of the sun, or the rain, or the kestrel. If there is enough food available the chicks fly after 16 days, then they must learn to catch their own fish …

For many years the colony has been protected by volunteers - **The Tern Watch** - who look out for threats to the colony and provide information to visitors.



More information at www.wildRye.info

Please join the Friends of Rye Harbour Nature Reserve to help support the protection of these endangered birds here.

Send a minimum of £5 to Rye Harbour Nature Reserve, East Sussex, TN36 4LU.