

# DRAVA

## Europe's Little Tern River

### Once a common bird – nowadays nearly extinct

In former times, the Little Tern *Sterna albifrons* was a typical breeding bird of the natural Drava River in Slovenia, Croatia and Hungary. Due to the construction of dams the important breeding areas between Maribor and Legrad have been destroyed in the 80ties and 90ties last century. The large Tern populations with several 100 breeding pairs disappeared from the Slovenian and declined on the Croatian Drava. Today, its distribution is limited along its free flowing lower course.

In the rest of Europe the situation is similar: Only few river systems e.g. the Loire/Allier in France or the Wistula/Odra in Poland host important inland breeding populations, making them to one of Europe's most precious natural values.

### Last breeding places - A string of pearls

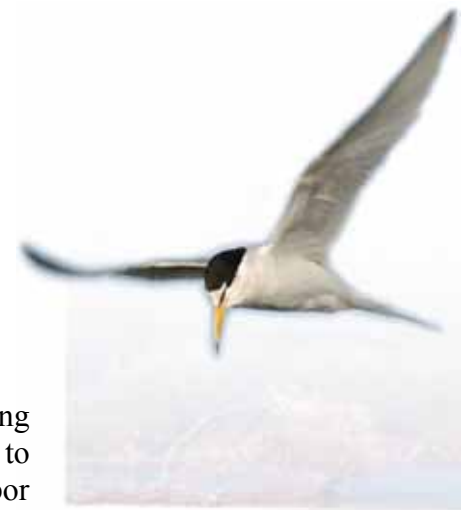
Today, only the 50 km long river section in the Croatian-Hungarian border area between Legrad and Ferdinandovac and some places downstream to Osijek offers extensive gravel and sand banks and feeding grounds for the Little Tern. These parts of the river downstream the Mura confluence count to the best preserved ones along the entire Drava. The breeding colonies, with altogether not more than 15 pairs, are located, as a string of 4 pearls, along the Drava: Botovo/Zákány, Repaš, Vizvár/Ferdinandovac and Donji Miholjac/Drávaszabolcs. Three of them are situated in the Croatian-Hungarian border area which indicates the high ecological value of the border stretches.



### Indicator of a living river

The Little Tern is one of the best indicators for well-preserved natural river stretches; where it occurs the Drava is in good natural condition. Its presence is strongly connected to those stretches where the river is able to erode its banks and create a wide river bed. They are characterised by shifting gravel and sand banks as breeding grounds, shallow water zones and bays as fish nurseries and therefore appropriate feeding grounds as well as steep banks.

The dynamic and interaction of sediments and water along those stretches is crucial. Only if new gravel and sand banks can appear after high water periods, appropriate nesting places can be created.



**In overall Europe only few rivers possess suitable habitats for the Little Tern. The Drava in the border area between Croatia and Hungary is one of them.**

Breeding site on the Drava at Repaš  
© A. Mohl / WWF

**The extensive gravel sand banks of the intact river provide ideal breeding grounds.**

## Endangered species

The breeding places of the Little Tern on the Drava are shared between several bird species; representing nearly the entire ensemble of bird species depending on gravel and sand banks. In 1997, about 45 pairs of the Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* and 5 pairs of the Little Tern bred together in a mixed colony on a large gravel bank at Repaš. This river stretch hosts the largest colony of Little Terns on the Drava. Several breeding pairs of the Common Sandpiper *Acitis hypoleucos* and the Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* were also present.

Steep sand banks, which are created by the river when eroding its banks and thus widening its bed, are frequented by colonies of Sand Martin *Riparia riparia* and Bee-eater *Merops apiaster*. The kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* can also be found here.

## EU protects the Little Tern

EU environmental legislation demands the protection of the Little Tern and its habitats. According to Annex I of the *EU Birds Directive* the Little Tern is of community interest which requires special conservation measures concerning their habitats. The *EU Habitats Directive* obliges to conserve important habitats as gravel and sand banks. Under both Directives areas as the Drava have to be protected as Natura 2000 sites and managed under certain obligations: “prevent deterioration” and “start improvement” of their habitats. In Slovenia and Hungary the Drava is already nominated, in Croatia it is proposed for the Natura 2000 network.

The *EU Water Framework Directive* highlights the protection of river, including the prevention of deterioration and the improvement of the ecological state to achieve “good ecological status” of the waters. The protection of the Little Tern is already on the agenda in Croatia. According to the National Biodiversity Strategy from 1999 the Little Tern needs priority action for protection. This includes the protection of the natural Drava river banks.

## Impacts by water management

Ongoing river channelling and sediment extraction activities by Croatia and Hungary are seriously threatening the last remaining colonies of the Little Tern along the four “Drava pearls”. Human disturbance (boat tourism, anglers) is also an increasing threat.



The small population of about 15 breeding pairs is threatened by extinction, if Croatia and Hungary continue with outdated water management practices.



A Couple of terns on a sand bank  
© C. Haraszthy



Destruction of a breeding site at Repaš in 2003  
© D. Reeder/WWF

## Little Tern Alert

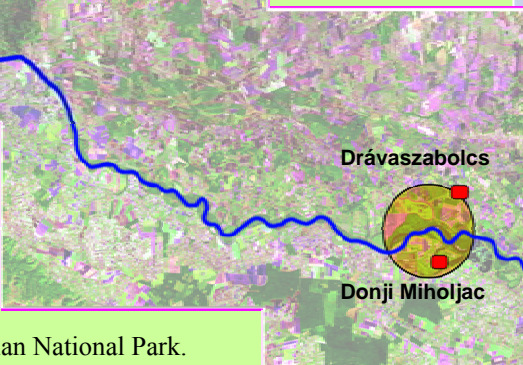
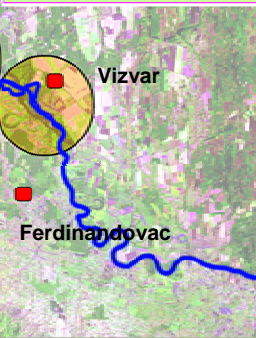


- **Botovo/Zákány:** Since 2000 the breeding place, a gravel bank is being exploited by the Croatian firm Božić-Granit and commissioned by Croatian Waters for the purpose to regulate the water flow of the Drava.

- **Repaš:** In 2003, one breeding spot at the bridge between Repaš and Molve has been destroyed by a groin. It was built by Croatian Waters to regulate the water flow. A decision of the Nature Conservation Inspectorate considered the measures as illegal and ordered to remove this barrier from the gravel bank. This order has been ignored by Croatian Waters so far.

- **Vizvár/Ferdinandovac:** In 2002 the site has been impacted by a groin and further stone barriers. A potential breeding site was destroyed by Croatian Waters. Further downstream sand is being excavated by the Hungarian firm “Bolho-Kikötő KFT”, and commissioned by the Hungarian Water Management. This extraction works are even supported by the Hungarian National Park.

- **Donji Miholjac/Drávaszabolcs:** In this section sand is being excavated by Croatian firms to a large extent and therefore the natural source for new sand banks and breeding grounds removed.

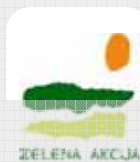
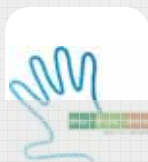


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### A change is needed

The survival of the last breeding pairs of the Little Tern on the Drava is very uncertain if water management in Croatia and Hungary is not shifted from “river regulation to river restoration”. This would mean to implement examples of best practice in line with the EU Water Framework Directive, the Habitats and Birds Directives.

- Stoppage of further gravel and sand extraction and the building of river training structures along those four important breeding sites.
- Removal of existing built structures from those sites, e.g. as already demanded by a decree in case of the Repaš area.
- Extensive restoration of additional sites between Legrad and Ferdinandovac and others (removal of river training structures; widening of the river bed). This would mean to manage the entire river in this way that new sites can be created by the river itself.
- Establishment of an international protection status as proposed by the transboundary Biosphere Reserve “Danube-Drava-Mura”.



#### Contact:

Arno Mohl  
WWF Austria  
Ottakringerstr. 114-116  
A-1160 Vienna  
Tel.: 0043 1 83 488 300  
Email: [am@wwf.at](mailto:am@wwf.at)  
[www.sterna-albifrons.net](http://www.sterna-albifrons.net)