

LITTLE TERN

Sterna albifrons



Description

Terns are related to the gulls. With long narrow wings, long, often forked tails they are quite streamlined and look elegant in flight. The Little Tern is the smallest tern in Europe. It has a typical neat white forehead, black-tipped yellow bill and buff-coloured legs. The wings are grey, with a white underside and a couple of darker outer primaries. There is hardly any gender differentiation in the adult plumage. Nestlings are coloured in grey, brown and yellow - highly adapted to the typical nesting habitats on more or less vegetation free shores or river banks.

Distribution and Habitat

Sterna albifrons occurs almost worldwide in various subspecies, with the stress on the temperate and tropic regions. In Europe it has a scattered distribution.

It is strongly migratory, wintering in the subtropical and tropical regions. Most of the European birds move along the Atlantic shore to West-Africa.

The Little Tern is a colonial breeder. Typical colonies do not exceed numbers of 20 breeding couples - nevertheless some colonies are formed by some hundred pairs. Nest distances are very low, mixed colonies with other Terns, Waders or Plovers are common.

Today, the European population is mainly concentrated in coastal areas. Inland populations had a strong negative population trend, especially between 1970 and 1990. Today population trend in some areas is still negative. In coastal areas Terns prefer undisturbed sandy shores. Inland populations need sand or gravel banks and islands on dynamic rivers. The Little Tern needs open areas with little vegetation. Near their breeding places they need shallow and clear water to hunt for young or small fishes.

Biology and Behaviour

The Little Tern feeds by plunge-diving for fish (only one of three attempts successful), crustaceans and sometimes insects. The offering of fish by the male to the female is part of the courtship display – one of the fascinating elements of tern behaviour; others are fish-flight or aerial-glide.

Terns are long distance migrants: they arrive in their European breeding areas in April/May and start breeding in May. They lay 2 - 4 eggs on the ground and alternate in feeding and hatching. Like all Terns, it is defensive of its nest and young and will attack predators.

facts and figures

size: Ø 24 cm
wing span: Ø 48 cm
weight: Ø 45 g
food: mainly fish
age: average 7
(max. observed 21)

population in Europe

rivers: about 1500 (proofed)
coasts: 35.000 - 55.000

Conservation

EU Birds Directive: Annex I
In many countries
endangered or even extinct
Status unfavourable



An adult with a nestling
© J. Bohdal/Naturfoto

Little Tern • Charrancito • Zwergseeschwalbe Sterne naine • Kiscsér • Mala čigra • Rybitwa bialoczelna • Mažoji žuvedra • Крячок малий



Waterfowls are tolerated near their nest. Most of the young fledge until July. In September the Terns depart.

Status and Threats

At the beginning of the 19th century the Little Tern was a common bird of European shores, rivers and wetlands. In the 20th century populations of coastal areas decreased cause of habitat-loss, pollution and human disturbance.

The loss of inland populations has been even more severe. Due to dams, river regulation and sediment extraction it has lost most of its former habitats. The Little Tern population has declined or become extinct in many European countries. Typical breeding places on large rivers e.g. at Danube, Elbe and Rhine ceased.

Nowadays, only few river systems in Europe possess suitable habitats: the Loire/Allier in France, the Wistula/Odra in Poland, the Daugava in Latvia, the Nemunas in Lithuania, the Sava in Croatia and the Drava in Hungary and Croatia. The status of the Little tern on the rivers Tagus, Po and lower Danube is uncertain.

The Drava population is one of the most threatened ones. Old fashioned water management practices endanger the remaining pairs.



Inland River Populations
in Europe
Map: WWF

Conservation

The Little Tern is, like the other European Terns, listed in Annex I of the EU Birds Directive. Bird Life International assesses an unfavourable conservation status!

Measures have to be taken to preserve the remaining inland populations. Pristine or near-natural river stretches have to be protected. Regulated Rivers have to be restored.

A Best Practice project has been conducted on the Loire/Allier river system in France. With EU Life funding important river stretches have been preserved. 6.000 hectares floodplain areas have been bought to maintain the dynamic of the river system. Tourism control and environmental education protect sensitive areas.



The natural Loire River in
France
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