

Baltray Little Tern Colony Report 2026

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Little Tern chick | Photo Credit: Darci Breslin



NPWS An tSeirbhís Páirceanna
Náisiúnta agus Fiadhúlra
National Parks and Wildlife
Service



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1. Abstract

The 2026 Little Tern (*Sternula albifrons*) breeding season was a success. A record number of chicks and fledglings were produced on site. Full-time wardening of the colony began on the 13th of April and concluded on the 2nd of August. Night wardening began on the 19th May following the discovery of the first eggs, which meant that the site was now being wardened 24/7. The first egg was discovered on the 18th of May, and the first chicks were discovered on the 13th of June.

Two hundred and twenty nesting attempts were made over the course of the season which resulted in 444 eggs being laid in total by an estimate of around 225 nesting pairs. There were losses which occurred throughout the season, both egg and chick losses. Forty-two eggs were lost in total, 18 to corvid predation and to the tides. 19 were abandoned, four failed in hatching and one was crushed. 21 days was the average incubation period. Three hundred and ninety-four (394) chicks were hatched on site, of which 386 survived. There were seven cases of predation of chicks/fledglings. A Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*) was responsible for six of those predation events and a Peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) was responsible for the predation of one fledgling. 1 chick also failed after hatching and died. 2% of chicks hatched on site were lost/predated.

Three hundred and eighty-six (386) chicks successfully fledged from the site, which is a record number from the Baltray colony. It surpassed the record set last season by 139. The food availability was very high this season which could explain such high numbers of productivity.

2. Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge and thank the Louth County Council, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Dublin Zoo and Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage for providing the funding for the project.

We would like to thank the board of the Louth Nature Trust, notably Breffni Martin and Dominic Hartigan for all of the hard work and support provided over the course of the season. They are responsible for the smooth running of the project and coordination with the wardens

We extend our regards to Dominic Hartigan for overseeing the project and allowing us access to his land for the project.

We extend our appreciation to our night wardens - Gary McMahon and Frank O'Malley, along with additional night shifts being picked up by intern warden Cormac Roberts and volunteer Johnny Galway.

We would like to extend a wholehearted thank you to all of the volunteers who gave their time and put in hard work to help the project run so efficiently: Brónagh Barnes, Matthew Byrne, Billy Clarke, Noel Craig, Maurice Connaghy, Louise Brennan-Galway, Johnny Galway, Eithne and Martin Hamill, Tom Kavanagh, Noel Kelly, Evie McCloughan, Shannon McKenna (and Molly), Gary McMahon, Donal Mitchell, Mary Mulligan, Brendan Murray, Tahirih O'Brien, Pdraig O'Donnell, Frank O'Malley, Tim O'Sullivan, Liam Sheenan, Stuart Turnbull and Áine Walsh (and Daisy).

A special thank you to Jan Rod and Daniele Gioppo who came down and ringed our adult, chick and fledgling Little Terns on a weekly basis

Finally, we would like to thank the members of the public who followed the regulations and restrictions that were put in place and had interest and respect for the Baltray Little Tern Project.

3. Introduction

3.1 Background

Sternula albifrons are the smallest of the 5 tern species which visit Ireland. Little Terns are summer visitors to Ireland, which spend their winters in West Africa - namely Senegal. They come to Ireland in April to begin their breeding season and depart for Senegal in mid - late August. Little Terns are classed as an Annex I species under the EU Birds Directive, therefore meaning that the species has been awarded special protections for their habitat, reproduction and overall survival (National Parks & Wildlife Service, 2009).

According to the British Trust for Ornithology (2022), Little Terns will typically lay between 2-3 eggs per clutch. If the first nest fails early in the season, a pair may attempt to nest again and lay a smaller clutch. The incubation period for Little Terns is around 21 days from laying to hatching. Chicks will attempt to learn to fly at the 14–17-day mark but do not fully fledge until they reach 28 days old.

Conservation measures are necessary for Little Terns as they are ground-nesting birds. They create nests and lay eggs on shingle beaches, in which their eggs and chicks can camouflage with the shingle. The adaptation of the eggs and chicks to blend in with the shingle can open them up to possible disturbance by humans, as they are very difficult to spot to the untrained eye. They may be accidentally stood on by humans or dogs.

Nesting consists of creating a small “scrape” or dip in the shingle, often by the Little Tern sitting and shifting the shingle. They create their scrapes/nests above the high tide line.

3.2 Little Terns in Ireland

Little Terns were first recorded in Ireland in 1900 by RJ Ussher who first had records of Little Terns in County Louth. Wardening of Little Terns in Ireland began in Kilcoole (County Wicklow) in 1985 which was set up by BirdWatch Ireland. There are three established Little Tern colonies on the East Coast of Ireland. Kilcoole which started in 1985, Baltray (County Louth) which started in 2007 and Portrane (County Dublin) which started in 2018.

There are different organisations overseeing the wardening of the Little Terns in Ireland. BirdWatch Ireland in conjunction with the National Parks and Wildlife Service oversees the running of the Kilcoole colony. BirdWatch Ireland’s Fingal branch oversees the Portrane colony, and the Louth Nature Trust oversees the Baltray Colony.

Smaller colonies have also been recorded on the East Coast in Buckroney (County Wicklow), Cahore (County Wexford) and Lady’s Island (County Wexford). Historically on the West Coast they have been recorded in Donegal and Kerry.



Figure 1: Recorded Nesting colonies of Little Terns in Ireland

(birdwatchireland.ie/birds/little-tern/)

3.3 Little Terns in Baltray

3.3.1 - 20th Century [1960s – 1970s]

There are no detailed records of the site during the 1960s and 70s, but reliable observers noted them flying across the estuary and using the tidal mudflats for nesting. (Dominic Hartigan, pers. comm. 2013).

3.3.2 - 21st Century

Wardening of the Little Terns started in Baltray in 2007 - initiated by Sandra McKeever and Margaret Reilly. It was at that time that there was an established presence of wardens physically on site for the breeding season. There were no night wardens, however due to a lack of funding, which led to significant losses due to aerial predation from gulls (*Larus spp.*) and corvids. 2009 and 2010 saw the introduction of funding from the NPWS and Heritage Council allowing for the employment of night wardens therefore ensuring 24-hour coverage on the site. The 24-hour coverage created conditions which led to the most successful season up until that point.

NPWS withdrew funding in 2011 which meant that there was no night wardening for that season. This left the site open to ground mammal predation between 11am and 6am. The season was still successful however, with 84 fledged chicks (Reilly, 2011). Severe weather for the 2012 season caused a myriad of issues for the season: high spring tides causing tidal inundation resulting in a loss of 41 eggs, followed by a particularly intense session of fox predation causing a loss of an additional 45 eggs. Despite the losses, there were still 24 fledglings which successfully left the site.

The years following 2012 were very successful. Breeding success has increased between 2020 and 2026, in spite of spring tides and mammalian/avian predation during some years.

3.4 Project Aims

The aims of the Little Tern Protection Scheme in Baltray were curated by considering the Birds Directive 2009/147/EC. Little Terns are a migratory species that need protection during their breeding season.

Therefore, the aims of the project are to:

- Monitor all Little Tern eggs, chicks and fledglings as the season progresses
- Protect all Little Terns during the breeding season from human disturbance, dogs, mammalian and avian predators
- Gather data on the feeding, nesting and parental behaviours during the crucial incubation and chick rearing phases of the season
- Educate the public on the Little Terns and advise them to stay away from the breeding area
- To understand Little Tern ecology

3.5 The Baltray Site

The Little Terns on Baltray Beach occupy an area which borders on an area called The Haven (53°43'42.3"N 6°15'00.0"W). Baltray beach is a primarily sand and shingle beach, which is the preferred nesting substrate of the Little Terns. The Boyne Estuary SAC borders on the colony site. They use the river to fish and feed the colony. The Boyne River contains both sprat (*Sprattus sprattus*) and sand eel (*Ammodytes tobianus*), the primary diet of the Little Terns whilst they are breeding.

The site has slowly been growing over the years. The site has grown significantly since 2007 with the site reaching 1.8km in length in 2026. In 2007 the site was only approximately 300m long. There is a rockier section of the beach that was the original nesting site in 2007, as the site expands in a Northerly direction, the site turns from areas of rock to areas of shingle and sand.

The “Buffer Zone” the term used for all areas that are not available to the public but are also not being directly nested on by the Little Terns. The first buffer zone is where the headquarters (HQ) caravan is located. It is primarily an area of sand dunes which is rife with vegetation – mainly marram grass. The marram is an ideal habitat for two other bird species – Eurasian Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) and Meadow Pipit (*Anthus pratensis*). Both are ground-nesting, so its of importance that no people with dogs walk through the area. There is a secondary buffer zone which is in front of the pens, which is cordoned off from the main part of the beach by a blue rope. It gives the Little Terns space and separation from the

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dog-walkers and other beach users. There is also a tendency for the Little Terns to nest in the buffer zone in front of the pens, so for the safety of all chicks and adults it is roped off.

4. Methods

4.1 Fencing

Fencing was constructed on site to create a safe and suitable nesting area for the Little Terns. There were three types of fencing put up. Perimeter fencing, electric fencing and blue-rope fencing.

First to go up was the green plastic-mesh perimeter fencing, it creates a separation between the beach and the conservation project. It is placed along all of the routes onto the beach that are most used by the public. It also served to enclose and protect the areas of site of semi-fixed dune which were located right behind the pens.

The red electric fencing was used to create the pens which house the Little Terns. It was separated into 15 distinct pens which spanned 1.7km of the beach. It was set to a frequency that would deter but not injure any mammalian predators or dogs. The red fencing is most commonly used for livestock protection. It was constructed just above the summer high tide line and within the shingle area. This placement negated most tidal inundation, but the spring tides can sometimes climb up the beach and wash seaweed up to the pens, which can envelop any nests within the buffer zone, but this is a rarity. The back side of the pens is placed at the edge of the dune system. Grounding rods and battery packs were used to power the electric fencing. Zip ties and wooden posts were used to hold up the pens. There were 15 pens created in total. 1-14 were created during the initial fencing sessions, northward expansion of the pens followed the pattern of the 2025 season. In July, the “River Pen” was created to house 4 late nests.



Figure 2. Red Electric Fencing



Figure 3. Green Perimeter Fencing

4.2 Mapping

A Garmin ETREX 32x device was used to map the site. The coordinates of each nest were mapped using the device and then put into an excel spreadsheet. This provided wardens with an overview of how many nests were in each pen as the season progressed. To take the most accurate coordinate of the nest, the GPS device was held directly over the nest and captured.

The high traffic areas of the site were noted when the site was mapped, mainly the area that leads out onto the beach from The Haven. Considering the high traffic areas can aid in potentially needing to move nests.

4.3 Wardening

Wardening began on the 13th of April and concluded on the 1st of August. There were 3 day wardens on site from 9am – 5pm. Two full – time wardens and an intern warden. Day wardens work 9am to 5pm for 7 days a week. The job of the day wardens was to protect the colony from avian and mammalian predators, record and monitor all nests, chicks and adult Little Terns, take observations of interactions within the colony and monitor feeding. These responsibilities ensure that the colony has the best possible outcome by the end of the season. There were two night wardens which covered from 10pm to 6am – watching for any nocturnal mammalian predators/disturbances. Finally, there was a community of volunteers who would cover the times in which there was a gap between the day wardens and the night wardens. Volunteers covered the 6am – 9am shifts, along with the 5pm – 10pm shifts. This ensured that there was 24-hour coverage on the site.

Observations were often observed using binoculars and telescopes to have an unobtrusive look at the colony without creating disturbance. Wardens had a couple of tasks which were carried out daily to ensure that the Little Terns were being properly protected. Wardens would take observations of feeding behaviours, parent-chick behaviours, nesting behaviours and adult-adult behaviours. Wardens would often go into the pens and conduct searches for eggs/chicks and record what was found. A responsibility was to maintain the fencing and check it daily to ensure that there were no leverets or any small mammals caught in the fences. Keeping an eye out for any human/ dog disturbance on the beach. It was of utmost importance that there was vigilance surrounding the monitoring for aerial predators, raptors such as Sparrowhawks or Peregrine Falcons which can strike fast and with little to no prior warning. The Little Terns can alert to the presence of predators such as flying up in a big ball and being very vocal, along with divebombing the predator. The main method that the Little Terns have to protect themselves is to divebomb any perceived threats or even defecate on them if they get the opportunity.



Figure 4. Scope set up by wardens to observe the pens

4.4 Nesting and Marking Nests

Little Terns have specific nesting parameters along the shoreline/beach. Shingle is the substrate in which is preferred for nesting upon as the eggs/chicks are camouflaged by it. Nests can also be found on sandy or stony substrates too. Nests were found close to the tide line on a sandier part of the beach, or even as far up as where the vegetation of the embryonic dunes begin. All of this considered it can be very difficult to spot nests while searches are being carried out.

Nest searches were carried out by 2 or more wardens walking carefully, or slowly up and down the pens, scanning for nests and scrapes. Wardens would only enter the pens twice or thrice a week to avoid major disturbances and potential abandonment of nests due to stress. Due to the size of the site this year, sweeping the pens would often be split into two parts, for example on half would be swept one day, and 2 days later the other half would be swept. There would be a full sweep of all 14 pens at once, once a week to ensure that no nests or eggs were missed. Unobtrusive monitoring measures were taken on all days where the pens were not entered. Wardens would use scopes and sit at a distance from the pens and record observations and watch out for predators.

Marking nests happened whenever there was a sweep of the pens, and a new nest was found. The physical markers were usually natural elements that were found in the pens. Often a large flat rock, with the number of the nest inscribed on it with a permanent marker. Markers would have to be at least 1m away from the nest, as corvids can recognise the nest markers if they are too overt. The more that nest markers blend into the vegetation and elements within the pen, the less likely it is for corvids to be able to tell that it is a nest marker.



Figure 5. Image of Nest Marker 98 taken through a scope, with a Little Tern sitting on the nest

Nest decorating is seen in Little Tern nests. Shells, rocks and other little bits of substrate are used to decorate their nests. It can separate one nest from another. It makes each nest look different and individual. The combination of having a nest marker and a decorated nest makes it easier for both wardens and ringers to find and identify a specific nest.



Figure 6 & Figure 7. Two highly decorated Little Tern nests with shells and rocks

4.5 Nest Relocation

Relocating nests can sometimes be needed on site. The reason for relocating nests, often comes down to the tides. Tidal inundation can happen when there is a combination of high tides and nesting below the tide line. The high tides were monitored using the Boyne Bar Tides tidal chart. High spring tides can cause the tide to come up higher than the usual tide line. There were a few instances of nest relocation which happened this season. There were particularly high spring tides in June which led to a few nests needing to be relocated. The tide came all the way up into the buffer zone where there were 8 nests outside of the pens. Due to the relocation 7 of the 8 nests survived the spring tides.

The method that is used to relocate the nests is to create a shallow dip a foot or two away from the original nest. Take shells, and other elements of the nest and move it up to the new scrape. Try to make the new nest as identical to the original as possible before moving the eggs to the relocated nest. It was observed following the spring tides that all of the nests that were relocated, were still being incubated by the adult terns and were not abandoned.

4.6 Chick Management

4.6.1 Shelters

Protective measures on site were crucial for the survival of chicks. Shelters were placed in all of the pens with high densities of chicks. Shelters consisted of small, grey plastic pipes that smaller chicks could dash into if they felt threatened. There were also larger, black plastic shelters put down to house the bigger chicks if at all necessary. The shelters provided the chicks with protection from the sun, wind, rain, cold or predators. The only areas in which the shelters were placed were in open areas that did not have quick access to the natural vegetation which was typically closer to the embryonic dunes. The shelters were not as useful for the larger, more mobile chicks which could run into the vegetation if necessary.



Figure 7. Little Tern chick in a small plastic shelter

4.6.2 Ringing

Ringing for identification has undertaken weekly once there were eggs laid on site. The data that can be extrapolated from the ringing can be used to examine behaviour, population and even colony interactions. The ringer that is utilised by the Baltray Colony is Jan Rod.

Early season ringing consisted of using a trap over the nest to capture the adults sitting on it. Decoy eggs were placed into the nest as the trap was put over the nest, while the real eggs were kept warm in a polystyrene box. The main reason for decoy eggs is to prevent damage to the real incubating eggs from the parents who are trapped. The most successful trappings happened over incubating nests as the parents would be eager to get back to their nest. The procedure to collect the bird after

the trap closed had to happen quite quickly to prevent the adult bird from injuring itself. The ringer would quickly pick up the adult and bring it back to the caravan to ring it. The birds which have been trapped can be new birds or retraps. New birds have no rings and will be receiving rings for the first time. Retraps can either be metal-ringed only or colour ringed (darvic). If a new bird is captured it usually gets a metal ring with a 7-digit alphanumeric code starting with 2 letters and containing 5 numbers, followed by a green (darvic) ring with a 3-digit alphanumeric code. When it is a retrap, the metal ring or coloured ring or both are recorded. Finally, there are measurements taken of the adult bird for data collection purposes – weight, bill length and wing length before the real eggs are replaced and the adult is released. Adults will often preen on the shoreline to fix their feathers before returning to the nest.

The chick ringing process is a little bit different to the way that the adults are ringed. Chicks are ringed as they are found, picked up on the spot and assessed as to if they can get a darvic ring or not. Coloured rings can only go onto a chick if the chick weighs more than 25g. Metal rings can go on a chick once it has dried and is at least 24 hours old. Chicks were often found and ringed on the nest if they were 24 hours old, larger more mobile chicks which are 3 or more days old. The dune vegetation would have to be searched thoroughly along with the sides of the fencing to ensure no chicks are missed. The chicks are then put back down into the nest or near it so that the parents can find them to feed them.

Other species were also ringed during the ringing sessions. Adult and chick Ringed Plovers (*Charadrius hiaticula*) were ringed if they were came across during the sweeping of the pens. Two Eurasian Oystercatcher chicks (*Haematopus ostralegus*) were also ringed this year and are presumed to be full siblings to the three oystercatcher chicks ringed last year.



Figure 8. Little Tern adult after being ringed



Figure 9. Interesting Bars on Little Tern discovered during ringing



Figure 10. Last Little Tern Chicks being ringed in 2026



Figure 11. Oystercatcher chicks after being ringed 2026

4.7 Predator Management

24/7 monitoring on site is essential for managing disturbances and predators. A combination of the day wardens, night wardens and volunteers create the 24-hour protection. The day wardens and volunteers help to defend against the diurnal avian predators, and the night wardens defend against the nocturnal mammalian predators.

Avian predators are the main predators faced on site. There is a variety of raptors and corvids that prey on the Little Terns during the breeding season. Raptors such as Sparrowhawks, Peregrine Falcons and historically, Kestrels (*Falco tinnunculus*) and corvids such as Rooks (*Corvus frugilegus*) and Hooded Crows (*Corvus cornix*). The corvids would typically prey on the eggs. The raptors main goal was to prey on adults and chicks. The main way that the avian predators were dealt with was a mixture of clapping, shouting and running in the direction of the predator. There are issues with this method however, due to the size of the site. It wasn't always feasible for people to run long distances to mitigate the predators.

Ground predators were not a major issue on site. Historically there have been Brown Rats (*Rattus norvegicus*), Stoats (*Mustela erminea*), Hedgehogs (*Erinaceus europaeus*) and even a domestic House Cat (*Felis catus*). Those predators, apart from the house cat, have not been spotted on site in a few years. The main ground predator on site this season was the Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*). Night wardens ensured that the foxes were not an issue for the Little Terns. There were no losses on account of fox predation this season. Foxes are warded off by the night wardens by flashing lights at them to scare them, and by continuously walking around the site to let their presence be known to the fox. The electric fencing was also vital for warding off the ground predators, but the electric fencing had to be routinely checked as if the batteries were to die then the fence would not be as effective.

The perimeter fencing had motion-sensor lights placed on some of the posts which could flash a light and potentially scare off a predator. The lights may be triggered however by movement from the hares or by the night wardens walking past. The night wardens also had a thermal camera to spot the predators.

There were also plastic rings, cut from plastic bottles, nailed to the top of the perimeter and electric fencing's wooden posts. They were put there to prevent aerial predators (mainly sparrowhawks and corvids) from perching on them and watching the colony and waiting for the moment to strike.

4.8 Public Awareness

4.8.1 Signage

Signs were erected all over the site to raise awareness for the conservation project. At the beginning of The Haven there was a large sign standing beside the gate, which asked the public to keep dogs on the lead when walking through the conservation area. There were signs created and put up along the most travelled routes down onto the beach, which continuously ask beach users to stay well away from the breeding area and to keep dogs on the leads. The signs contained information about the Little Terns and showed images of eggs and chicks. The biggest signs with the images of the Little Terns were placed at the entrance onto the beach, specifically so that people would know what to look out for.

There was a blackboard placed at the entrance to the beach too, it contained up to date statistics on the nest, egg and chick numbers on the beach as the season progressed. It also asked politely for all dogs to be kept on leads during the breeding season. The updates allowed for the local people to remain up to date on the status on the colony and how the season is progressing.



Figure 12. Sign at the Entrance to the site



Figure 13. Blackboard for colony updates

4.8.2 Interactions with the Public

It was a daily occurrence that there would be an interaction between a warden or volunteer and a beach user. Typically, the beach user would not be aware of the project and would be approached by a warden or volunteer and asked to put their dog on a lead. There is a warden's guide that states that all volunteers and wardens must approach beach users calmly and politely, and if there is an aggression or hostility from the person who was being approached to simply walk away. The volunteers or wardens would need to explain the project, and the importance of keeping a dog on the lead to the beach user. It was vital to inform them to not go too close to pens as well as the law around interacting with and disturbing active nests and unfledged young (under Section 22 (9)(f) of the Wildlife Act, 1976).

There were also wildlife photographers and enthusiasts who visited the beach for the opportunity to see the Little Terns, or even to see another rare visitor to Irish beaches – The Least Tern (*Sternula antillarum*) a rare American species of tern that flies between the Baltray site and the Portrane site, which has been spotted since 2018.

4.8.3 Public Outreach

To attract new volunteers and spread awareness to the public, outreach is a vital component. This season there was a lot of social media used to push the project out to a wider audience. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram were uploaded to weekly to share updates on the colony and the site as the season progressed. There was also a blog which was updated weekly with similar

updates to those going onto Instagram and Facebook. Public interaction and outreach are crucial for conservation projects, like the Little Tern Protection Scheme, Baltray. Without public outreach and visitors - conservation projects are not as successful.

There were also guided tours to the site set up by members of a Birdwatching group or by Dominic Hartigan to raise awareness of the conservation project. There was also a visit from the Minister of State for Nature, Biodiversity and Heritage, Christopher O'Sullivan TD to the site. The visit happened during National Biodiversity Week. The Minister was shown around the site, and had conversations with warden Ivan McKenna, and a couple of volunteers.



Figure 14. Ministers visit including, from the left, Breffni Martin, John Loughran, Helen Hanratty, Dominic Hartigan, Minister Christopher O'Sullivan TD, Cllr Michelle Hall, Ivan McKenna, Aine Walsh (and dog, Daisy)

5. Results

5.1 Weather

5.1.1 Temperature Data 2026

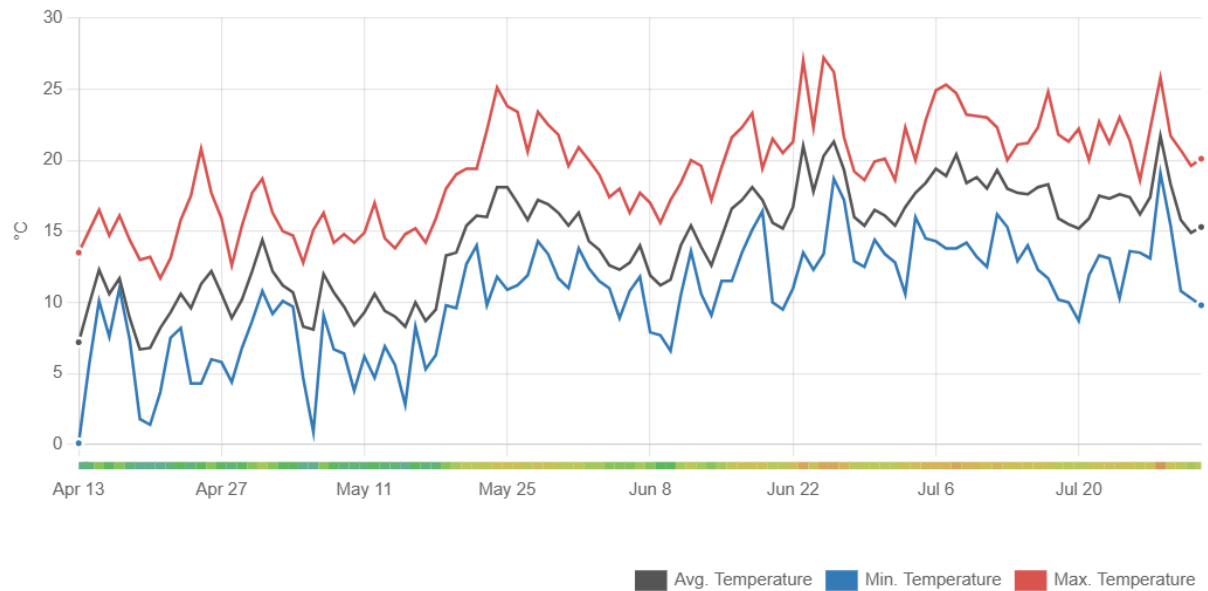


Figure 15. (Met Éireann, 2026)

Ireland has had consistently high temperatures for the summer of 2026. Met Éireann reported that July was the “second highest July since 1900 and the 3rd hottest month overall” (Met Éireann, 2026). There were cooler temperatures at the start of the season with temperatures sitting around 10 - 13°C but did increase as the summer progressed with temperature hitting a high of 21.7°C in July.

5.1.2 Precipitation Data 2026

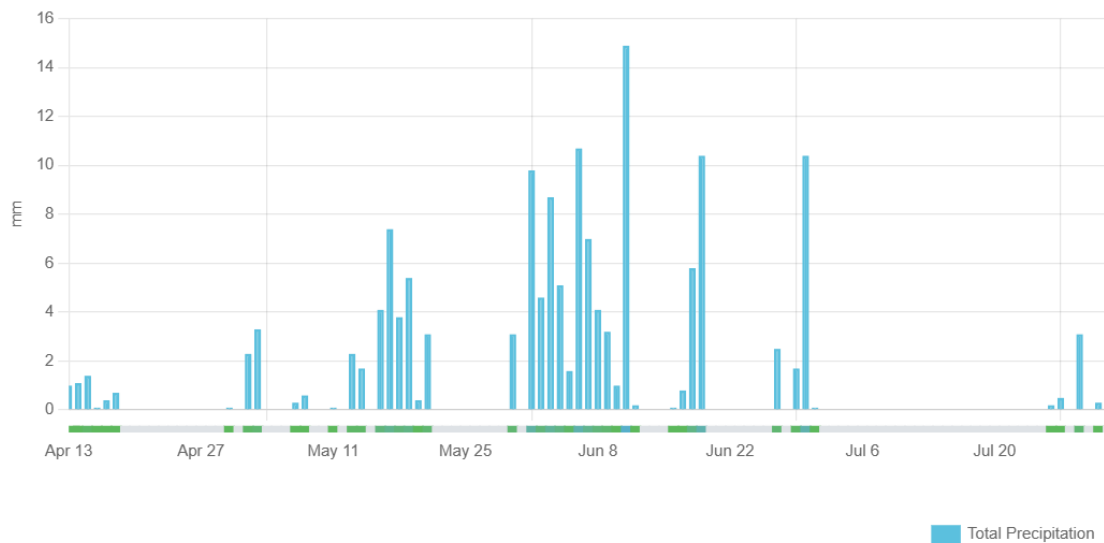


Figure 16. (Met Éireann, 2026)

Ireland had an unusually dry summer in 2026, with 0mm of rain falling between 2nd July and the 26th of July. An average of 1.0mm of rain fell in July. There were many wet days in June, with a high level of rain (14.9mm) falling on the 11th of June. June was the wettest month of the breeding season.

5.2 Breeding Pairs

The density of nesting, combined with the large nesting site – it was not possible to determine an exact number of breeding pairs for this season. If the assumption was that all nesting attempts were carried out by distinctive pairs, then at maximum there were 250 breeding pairs on site (440 breeding individuals). There is a possibility that some nesting attempts were repeat nesting attempts from failed nests, usually as a result of predation or another type of loss event. Failed or abandoned nests would cause the minimum number of breeding pairs to drop to 212. The total number of failed/abandoned nests was 8.

5.3 Nest and Egg Counts

The total nest count for the 2026 season was 220 nests, 62 more than last year. A combination of predation, tidal inundation, failed nests and abandoned nests dropped the viable nest number to 201 viable nests. In total there were 448 eggs laid, 406 were successful and 42 failed – leading to a 96.6% hatching success rate. Of the 220 nests, the average clutch size was 1.85 (32 clutches of 1, 132 clutches of 2 and 56 clutches of 3).

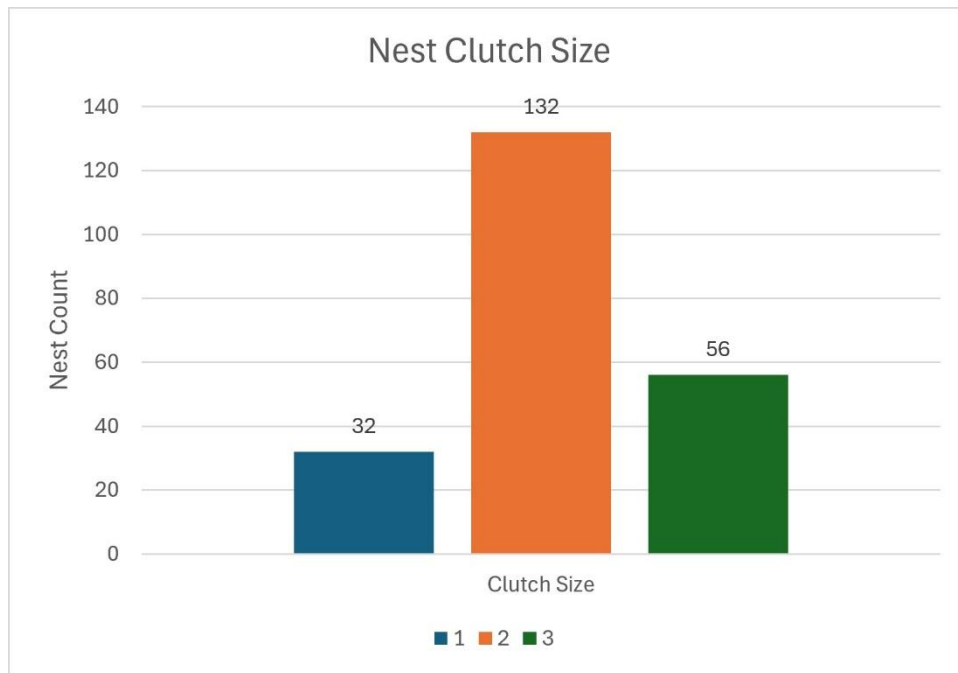


Figure 17. Bar Chart of Clutch Sizes

5.4 Spatial Distributions of Nests

The Little Terns would show preferences towards some areas of the beach over others. Pen 7 had the highest concentration with 44 nests, followed by Pen 3 which had 26 nests and Pen 6 which had 23 nests. 77 nests were located in front of and to the right of the HQ caravan in the river pen, buffer zone and pens 1-5. 35% of the nests were located on the right side of the pens. The other 65% of the nests were located on the left side of the HQ Caravan. There were 19 nests located in the buffer zone over the course of the season. Pens 1-5 were a mixture of shingle and sand; Pens 6-8 had more shingle areas and pens 10 – 14 had much more sand than shingle. The latter pens (6-14) had a lot of naturally occurring vegetation which blended into the embryonic dunes behind the pens.

The River Pen had 7 nests in it, all of which were found in the latter half of the season and were some of the last nests of the season. The river pen was the rockiest part of the nesting are, mainly consisting of larger rocks and shells, compared to the other pens which had sandier, and shingle-based substrate. There was little to no vegetation in the River Pen.

The Buffer Zone was made up of shingle but was also covered in dense boughs of seaweed which could become tangled in the electric fencing.

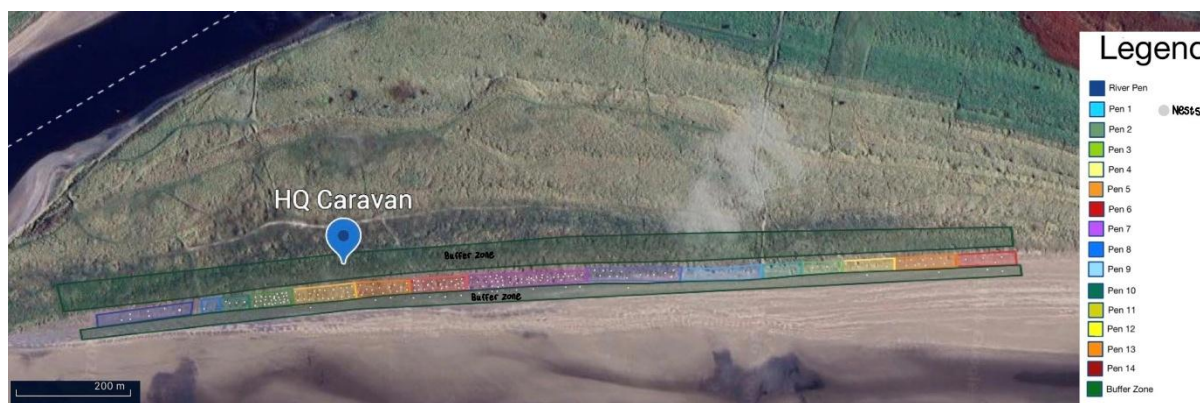


Figure 18. Map of the Pens and Nesting Area 2026

5.5 Predation

There was a moderate amount of aerial predation this season. Corvids and raptors were the main perpetrators of the predation. At the beginning of the season corvids – mainly Hooded Crows and Rooks were an issue. They mainly preyed upon the eggs; 15 eggs were predated on by the corvids as the season was beginning. They would perch on the perimeter fences poles or in the dunes, watching the colony for any movement or Little Terns lifting from nests. They would be chased off by wardens/volunteers by clapping and shouting.

There were 7 cases of raptor predation on site. There were 7 witnessed attacks (6 via sparrowhawk and 1 via peregrine falcon), upon fledglings. The attacks were usually centred around Pen 7, which had the highest number of chicks and out on the shoreline where the fledglings had no place to hide. There were also three cases of predation on the adult terns and Ringed Plovers by the Sparrowhawks. There was both a male and a female Sparrowhawk preying on the Little Terns but were not presumed to be a pair feeding chicks. The male was spotted much more often than the female.

There was no mammalian predation on the site this season, but foxes were spotted multiple times by night wardens. The foxes did not manage to take any eggs, chicks or adult terns during the season. There was an estimation between 5-6 foxes (2 adults, 4 cubs) on site during the season, but it was believed that the population of rabbits in The Haven was keeping them occupied.

5.6 Egg Loss

Tidal inundation, hatching failures and abandonment were the main causes of egg loss apart from predation. 3 eggs were lost to tidal inundation, 5 failed in hatching and 19 eggs were abandoned. The spring tides did not cause major damage to the egg numbers as the wind would often push the

tide back. 7 nests with 20 eggs were abandoned. The causes for this may have been infertility or the eggs may have been laid too late in the season and not properly incubated. In comparison to last year, there were no eggs abandoned as a result of sand blow. There were no particular points in the season in which more eggs were lost or abandoned than others.

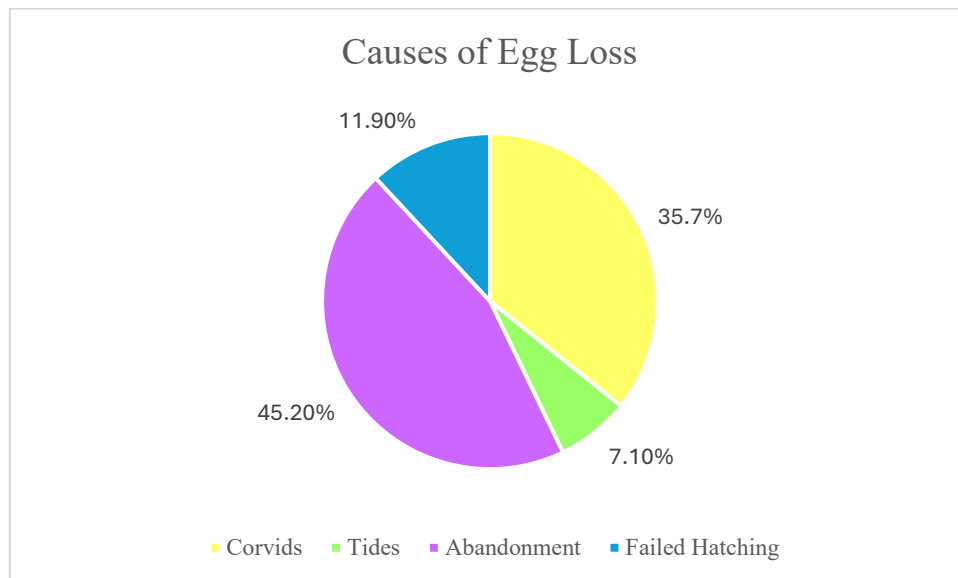


Figure 19. Pie Chart of the causes of egg loss in 2026

5.7 Incubation

Past reports and literature state that the incubation period of the Little Terns is between 18 – 22 days in length (Cramps, 1985). This was usually calculated by counting the number of days between laying and hatching, although it was not always possible for a nest/ egg to be found on the day of laying. A nest was recorded on the day it was found and then monitored consistently until the day it hatched. Mean incubation time on site was 21 days, which was averaged out from this year's colony records and dates of laying vs dates of hatching. Towards the end of the season, when there were less eggs still incubating it was easier to monitor the incubation of individual nests.

Nest 144 was one example of this; the nest was discovered by wardens on 06/06/26 with only 1 egg after watching behaviours from adult terns and checking it daily and on the 07/06/26 on inspection there were 2 eggs in the nest and so incubation time was recorded to have started on the 06/06/26. The first egg then hatched on 27/06/26 and the second egg on the 28/06/26 – meaning the incubation period for both eggs was 21 days.

5.8 Chicks and Fledglings

The first two chicks hatched on the 13/06/26, a week later than the 2025 season. 394 eggs hatched on site, with 8 being lost to predation or hatching failure. Out of 444 eggs that were laid, 86.93% hatched and fledged.

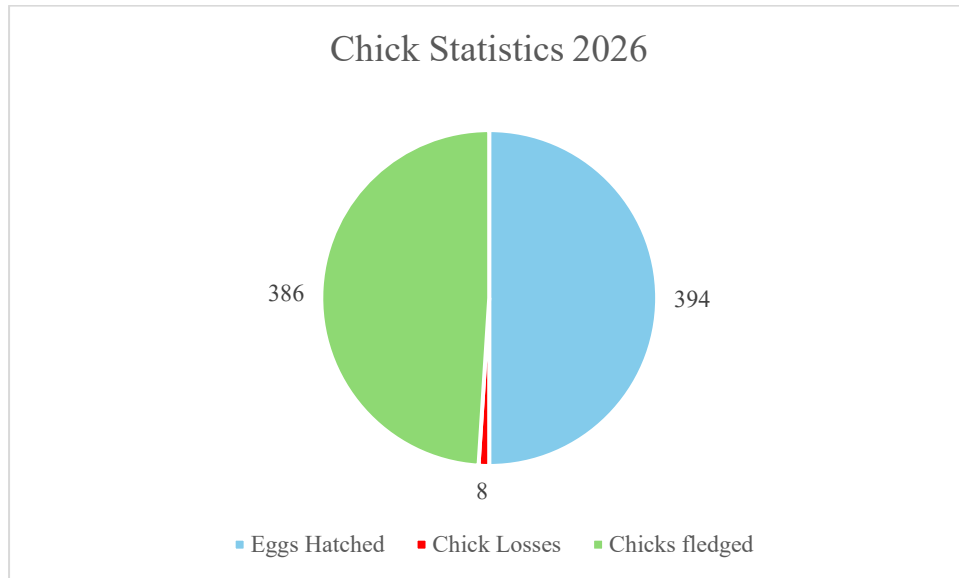


Figure 20. Chick Survival Statistics 2026

The productivity and success of the season is based off of the assumption of how many chicks survived and fledged, along with the number of breeding pairs in a particular season. Using the assumption that the average number of pairs were 110, and there were an estimated number of 386 fledglings.



Figure 21. Chicks from Nest 207

5.9 Ringing

Ringing was undertaken on site to keep scientific and historical records of the colony and individuals over time. Adult Little Terns and chicks/ fledglings were ringed on a weekly basis. There were also a couple of Ringed Plover adults and chicks ringed over the course of the season.

5.9.1 Adult ringing

There were 14 new adult Little Terns ringed this season, and 23 retraps. All adults were caught and ringed while on the nest and monitored closely to ensure that no injury or distress occurred during the process. Adults are ringed with both metal and colour (darvic) rings.

5.9.2 Chick Ringing

223 chicks were metal ringed in Baltray which is a record for the colony. All chicks were unique and usually ringed on or around the nest. 119 chicks received both a metal ring and a colour (darvic) ring. Chicks would usually have to be ringed with the darvic rings later in the season due to having to be a certain weight in order to get a darvic ring. A chick must be 25 grams or more in order to get a darvic ring, which can take chicks about a week after hatching to reach that weight.

5.9.3 Oystercatcher Chicks

Two Oystercatcher chicks hatched out on site along with the Little Terns. On 02/07/26 they were ringed with 4 rings each. They each got a metal ring, a yellow coloured (darvic) ring and a red ring

for the Dublin Bay Birds Project and a green ring. They were almost a month old at the time of ringing.



Figure 22. Ringed Little Tern Chick with a green darvic ring and a metal ring



Figure 23. Ringed Oystercatcher chicks

6. Discussion

2026 has become the most successful Little Tern breeding season in Baltray. With 139 chicks more than the 2025 season. There was a 156% increase in chicks between the 2025 and 2026 seasons. 386 chicks fledged out of 394 chicks hatched, due to predation from very persistent raptors. The previous most successful seasons 2025 and 2013 had 247 fledglings and 193 fledglings respectively.

The chick losses were remarkably low considering the consistency of the Sparrowhawks and Peregrine Falcon. 8 chicks were lost in total – 7 of which were from the raptors. They were mainly attacking during the evenings or early mornings. There was an abundance of chicks/fledglings on site that the raptors were sticking around to feed on. The fledglings were easier targets when they ventured out onto the beach where there was nowhere to hide from predators, not helped by the fact that fledglings are not often proficient fliers. 1 chick died of natural causes within the pens. It was found 3m away from the nest dead, it appeared to have a blocked chute which led to its passing.

There was very hot weather throughout the summer which may have led to the increase in breeding success for the season. The beginning of the season had lower temperatures of 11-14°C and had a few rainy days, but the months of June and July having very warm weather and no rain. Temperatures reached 26°C and there were 26 consecutive days without any rain. The sudden raise in temperature seemed to spur on the Little Terns as hatching boosted in June with 202 nests being laid. Over 200 nests being laid in the span of a month is a new phenomenon for the Baltray site. The warm weather is also believed to have pushed along the hatching on site as there was a hatching boom between the 13th and 26th of June. The first chicks hatched out of Nest 111 on the 13th of June and was quickly followed by around 100 more nests hatching.

Feeding was observed every day when monitoring the colony. The main sources of food for the Little Terns were Sprat and Sandeel. At different points in the season, Sprat was more abundant than Sandeel. There was more Sandeel being proffered to adult terns by other adult terns during the nesting/incubating period of the season. Parents sitting on nests would be offered Sandeel by their partner and would often be seen flying over the site with Sandeel. It is the bigger of the two main fish that are used for feeding. According to NatureScot (2026) Sandeel can be up to 30cm in length. The size is not too big for the adults to safely ingest, but the chicks struggle to consume fish of that size. The ideal size of fish for the Little Tern chicks is Sprat. New (2022) states that Sprat can reach a maximum of 17-18cm in length, which is much more manageable for the chicks to eat. The adult Terns fish in the Boyne Estuary that borders the site and carries the fish back to either their partner or to the chicks. Food appeared to be abundant at the colony this season, due to the numbers of Little Terns coming up the coast from the other colonies like Portrane and Kilcoole. At one-point wardens counted an approximate number of 700-800 Little Terns feeding and roosting on Baltray beach in mid-July. Not only were there lots of Little Terns feeding and roosting on site, but there were also other species of tern following the same

behaviours. Tern species like Roseate Terns (*Sterna dougallii*) and Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*) which visit from Rockabill Island off the coast of Skerries. Sandwich Terns (*Sterna sandvicensis*) also feed and roost on the beach and have been witnessed nesting and feeding in the reservoir in The Haven. Historically, Arctic Terns (*Sterna paradisaea*) have been witnessed visiting Baltray beach but only a handful of individuals were spotted this season. The high numbers of visiting terns showed that the food stocks could not only support the colony, but various other species.

The first nest was found on the 18th of May 2026, which was later than the previous year which kicked off on the 15th of May 2025. Seabirds appeared to be delayed across the world, and The British Mountaineering Council (2024) have connected the delays happening over the last few years with climate change altering the food stocks. Sandeel, for example are beginning to migrate to cooler waters and therefore becoming less available for seabirds in their usual nesting locations.

The warm weather appeared to push productivity on site. Warm weather helped with the incubation process, along with the lack of rain. Eggs/ small chicks could be kept warm even if adults were not able to stay on the nests for long periods of time, maybe as a result of disturbance to the colony.

Human disturbance was a major issue for the season, wardens and volunteers alike were often harassed by beach users. Dog walkers in particular became an issue during the peak of the season. Dogs would be off of leads and wardens or volunteers would approach them politely to ask if the dog could be put on the lead until they were past the nesting area. Many people were unaware of the project and placed their dog on the lead and continued on their way, but there were a select few people who would argue or even threaten the wardens/volunteers for asking. It reached a point during the season that some volunteers would not come back to the project as they didn't want to be abused. The reason for putting dogs on lead in the first place was to protect the chicks who can camouflage with the sand, from accidentally being stepped on or chased by dogs. Minimising disturbance to the Little Terns during their breeding season is one of the main responsibilities of the wardens, which is made harder by people who will not listen to the wardens or heed the signage on site.

Predation on site was from raptors and corvids, in spite of this the season was highly successful. There were only 7 verified raptor attacks that resulted in the loss of a chick or a fledgling. The male sparrowhawk made its first appearance in July and came back daily until the season ended and all the fledglings left the site. Wardens and Volunteers alike were vigilant to watch out for the avian predators and helped to try and thwart the attacks of the sparrowhawks. Corvid predation began when we had eggs on site and stopped when there were had more chicks than eggs. Rooks and Hooded crows were persistent for the first 3 weeks of the season after eggs were laid. Groups of rooks would sit along the back path and watch the colony, waiting for an opportunity to strike and prey on the eggs. Rooks were chased off by using a combination of running, clapping, and shouting to create disturbances for the

rooks and cause them to stay away from the site for a couple of hours. There were days in which there were no appearances from any corvids, that would be due to the efforts of wardens and volunteers.

There was another environmental factor which may have caused disruption on site, or to the food stocks. Dredging activities may have been a contributing factor. In June and July there were many sightings of the dredger in the mouth of the Boyne Estuary. Dredging was carried out on a total of 26 days for a few hours in the morning (typically between 6am - 9am). Dredge was transported to Drogheda harbour, presumably for beneficial reuse; it was not discharged along the northern shore. This compares with 2017 when intensive dredging was carried out daily, often on two tides, from April to September (99 days); there was zero little tern productivity that year. Given that minimal dredging was also observed in the summer of 2025, this reinforces the observation that dredging, particularly in the early part of the season, adversely impacts little terns productivity likely through increased turbidity, disturbance of the benthos and smothering from sedimentation.

7. Recommendations

- The front buffer zone should be erected at the same time as the pens as to have a barrier between the beach users and the Little Terns, and there should be signs at the start of the buffer zone that indicate as to why it is so vital not to enter the nesting area.
- New signage; The current signs are quite old and weathered from years of usage, revamping them may make them easier to read and understand.
- The blackboard was quite helpful over the last few years, it helps to keep the public informed of the numbers of Little Tern chicks on site and helps to keep them feeling involved. The blackboard should be used again next year
- Social media usage – Instagram and Facebook were so handy for providing updates to all interested parties and can reach a wider audience and hopefully bring more attention to the project. Continued use of the social media platforms would be advised.
- Little Terns blog was also extremely helpful for spreading awareness of the project and should be used again next year

8. Other Species on Site

Common Name	Latin Name	Designation
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	Amber-Listed
Black Headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	Red-Listed
Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	Green-Listed
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	Amber-Listed
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	Amber-Listed
Common Starling	<i>Sternus vulgaris</i>	Amber-Listed
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	Amber-Listed
Common Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	Green-Listed
Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	Red-Listed
Curlew Sandpiper	<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	Red-Listed
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	Red-Listed
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	Red-Listed
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	Amber-Listed
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	Amber-Listed
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	Green-Listed
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	Amber-Listed
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	Amber-Listed
Great Black-Backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	Amber-Listed
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Amber-Listed
Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>	Amber-Listed
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Green-Listed
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	Red-Listed
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	Green-Listed
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Amber-Listed
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	Red-Listed
Least Tern	<i>Sternula antillarum</i>	* Not Designated
Lesser Black-Backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	Amber-Listed
Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>	Red-Listed
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Green-Listed

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Little Gull	<i>Hydrocoloeus minutus</i>	Green-Listed
Little Tern	<i>Sterna Albifrons</i>	Amber-Listed
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	Green-Listed
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	Red-Listed
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	Amber-Listed
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	Green-Listed
Pied Wagtails	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	Green-Listed
Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>	Red-Listed
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	Green-Listed
Roseate Tern	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>	Amber-Listed
Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	Amber-Listed
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	Amber-Listed
Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>	Amber-Listed
Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	Amber-Listed
Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	Green-Listed
Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Green-Listed
Wheater	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	Amber-Listed
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	Amber-Listed
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	Red-Listed

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10. Links To Previous Reports

<https://www.louthnaturetrust.ie/uploads/documents/13/Baltray%20little%20tern%20report%202007.pdf>

<https://www.louthnaturetrust.ie/uploads/documents/5/Baltray%20Little%20Tern%20Report%202009.pdf>

<https://www.louthnaturetrust.ie/uploads/documents/6/Baltray%20Little%20Tern%20Report%202010.pdf>

<https://www.louthnaturetrust.ie/uploads/documents/7/Baltray%20Little%20Tern%20Report%202011.pdf>

<https://www.louthnaturetrust.ie/uploads/documents/8/Baltray%20little%20Tern%20Report%202012%20D.pdf>

<https://www.louthnaturetrust.ie/uploads/documents/9/Baltray%20Little%20Tern%20Report%202013%20d1.pdf>

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