

A6.90 Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

1. Status in UK

Biological status		Legal status		Conservation status
Breeding	✓	Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981	General Protection	Species of European Conservation Concern
Migratory	✓	Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985	General Protection Schedule 1(1)	(UK) Species of Conservation Importance
Wintering		EC Birds Directive 1979	Annex I Migratory	All-Ireland Vertebrate Red Data Book

2. Population data

	Population sizes (pairs)	Selection thresholds	Totals in species' SPA suite
GB	12,300	123	5,686 (46% of GB population)
Ireland	3,100	31	1,307 (42% of all-Ireland population)
Biogeographic population	195,105	1,950	6,993 (4% of biogeographic population)

GB population source: Gibbons et al. 1993

All-Ireland population source: Gibbons et al. 1993

Biogeographic population source: Hagemeyer & Blair 1997

3. Distribution

The Common Tern is a common and widespread breeding species of both coastal and inland regions in the northern hemisphere, especially at temperate and boreal latitudes. Its range extends south almost to the equator in West Africa and northern South America. The Common Tern is a long-distance migrant and winters mainly in the southern hemisphere. The species is polytypic and four sub-species have been described. Birds breeding in Europe belong to the nominate race *S. h. hirundo*, the range of which extends from eastern North America to western Siberia. Three other sub-species occur in Asia (Cramp 1985).

The European distribution of Common Tern is very scattered in the west, but much more continuous in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. It breeds in virtually all countries (other than Portugal), with the inland distribution generally confined to major river systems.

A significant proportion of the British population breeds in Scotland, particularly in the northern and western Isles and on the west coast, but with sizeable colonies also along the east coast firths. Common Terns also commonly breed inland on riverine shingle and islands, not only in Scotland but also in England. Coastal colonies in England are mainly concentrated in the north-east, East Anglia, at a few localities along the south coast, and in the north-west. The only Welsh colonies are on Anglesey. Inland breeding takes place mainly in

eastern Scotland and in central, eastern and southern England. Colonies in Ireland are well spread around the coasts, with scattered inland breeding through the midlands.

Common Terns breed around coasts and beside inland freshwater bodies. Coastal sites are mainly small rocky islets, shingle beaches, sand-spits and dunes, as well as among short vegetation (occasionally more scrubby growth). Inland sites include shingle banks in rivers, islands in lakes and gravel pits, marshes and shallow lagoons. More artificial sites, including waste ground, specially made floating rafts and even gravel-covered flat-roofs, are occasionally used.

Most feeding takes place within 3–10 km of the colony, but greater distances, up to 37 km or even “some scores” of km have been recorded (Cramp *et al.* 1974).

4. Population structure and trends

The European breeding population of Common Terns is estimated at between 195,105–227,250 pairs (Hagemeijer & Blair 1997), and the minimum of this range is the biogeographic population used in this review. The British population of 12,300 pairs is spread over 200 colonies ranging in size from under ten pairs to over 1,000. There are more than 50 further colonies in Ireland, totalling 3,100 pairs.

Information on numbers of Common Terns breeding in Britain and Ireland prior to the first census in 1969–1970 is very patchy and restricted to counts at a few colonies, which show no clear trend, though there is some evidence for a population peak in the 1930s (Cramp *et al.* 1974). In 1969–1970, there were an estimated 14,900 pairs breeding in Britain and Ireland, of which 10,800 were in Great Britain and 4,100 in the whole of Ireland. The total in the second census in 1985–1987 was very similar at 14,700, though the country totals were different, with 12,000 in Great Britain and 2,700 in Ireland (Lloyd *et al.* 1991). Within Britain, there had been a shift northwards with numbers in Scotland increasing from 4,300 to 6,200 pairs while numbers in England and Wales declined from 6,500 to 5,750. The other change during this period was an increase in inland nesting, both in Great Britain and in Ireland.

Limited information from elsewhere in the biogeographic range suggests some declines, *e.g.* in The Netherlands attributed partly to organochlorine pollution of the Rhine (Hagemeijer & Blair 1977), but otherwise fairly stable populations. Ringing suggests only limited interchange between colonies, and then probably by first-time breeders over short distances. Adults are very faithful to their breeding colonies (Cramp 1985).

Declines in specific colonies in Britain and Ireland, with some complete losses, can mostly be put down to habitat changes, *e.g.* coastal developments and increased disturbance, especially recreational, although as with all terns birds can desert breeding colonies for behavioural reasons, resettling again after a period of time. Riverine management has destroyed many former nesting sites on ephemeral shingle banks, but such inland sites have more than been replaced by gravel pits etc. Use of gravel pits, however, is affected by the often transitory nature of suitable habitats. Predation is a problem in some areas, especially where North American Mink *Mustela vison* have become well established, *e.g.* western Scotland (Craik 1995, 1997).

5. Protection measures for population in the UK

SPA suite

In the breeding season, the UK's SPA suite for Common Terns supports, on average, 6,993 pairs. This amounts to about 46% of the British breeding population, and about 42% of the all-Ireland population. The suite of 22 sites (Table 6.90.1) contains about 4% of the international population.

6. Classification criteria

All sites in the UK that were known to support more than 1% of the national Common Tern breeding population were considered under Stage 1.1, and all were selected after consideration of Stage 2 judgements.

The sites within the suite are distributed throughout the UK breeding range and cover the major population centres, including sites in Northern Ireland, North Wales, both the west and east coasts of Scotland, as well as the west, east and south coasts of England. Most sites are multi-species SPAs, of importance also for a range of other breeding seabirds, although Glas Eileanan in the Sound of Mull has been selected solely for its importance for breeding Common Terns. There is a very long recorded history of occupancy at many of these SPAs with records from the 19th century for many sites (Holloway 1996).

As the selection of sites under Stage 1.1 resulted in a suite of SPAs which includes the main population centres of breeding Common Terns throughout their UK distribution, there was no need to consider additional sites for selection under Stage 1.4

Distribution map for breeding Common Tern SPA suite

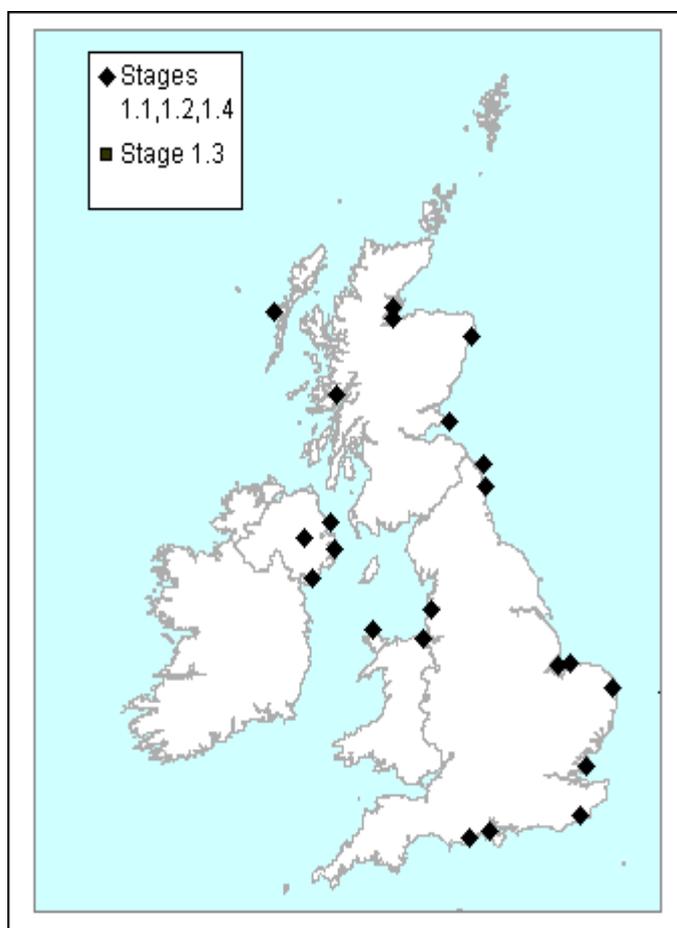


Table 6.90.1 – SPA suite

Site name	Site total	% of biogeographical population	% of national population	Selection stage
Breydon Water	155	0.1	1.3	1.1
Carlingford Lough	339	0.2	10.9 (Ire)	1.1
Coquet Island	740	0.4	6.0	1.1
Cromarty Firth	294	0.2	2.4	1.1
Dungeness to Pett Level	266	0.1	2.2	1.1
Farne Islands	230	0.1	1.9	1.1
Firth of Forth Islands	800	0.4	6.5	1.1
Foulness	220	0.1	1.8	1.1
Glas Eileanan	530	0.3	4.3	1.1
Inner Moray Firth	310	0.2	2.5	1.1
Larne Lough	180	0.1	5.8 (Ire)	1.1
Lough Neagh and Lough Beg	185	0.1	6.0 (Ire)	1.1
Monach Isles	194	0.1	1.6	1.1
North Norfolk Coast	460	0.2	3.7	1.1
Poole Harbour	155	0.1	1.3	1.1
Ribble and Alt Estuaries	182	0.1	1.5	1.1
Solent and Southampton Water	267	0.1	2.2	1.1
Strangford Lough	603	0.3	19.5 (Ire)	1.1
The Dee Estuary	277	0.1	2.3	1.1
The Wash	152	0.1	1.2	1.1
Ynys Feurig, Cemlyn Bay and The Skerries	189	0.1	1.5	1.1
Ythan Estuary, Sands of Forvie and Meikle Loch	265	0.1	2.2	1.1
TOTALS	6,993	3.6%	46.2% 42.2% (Ire)	