

Baltray - Little tern conservation scheme - 2018

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Introduction

Following the disappointing season in 2017, and in light of the fact that it may have been caused by dredging (see our scientific report in reports section), and that dredging may continue unabated in 2018 (in accordance with the terms of the Drogheda Port foreshore), it was decided to take a wait and see approach to the 2018 season.

May 15, 2018

Very few birds, with a total of just 14 just little terns, and six sandwich terns. No sign of fishing or courtship.

May 30, 2018

The last two weeks has seen the little tern flock vary from a maximum of about 50 birds, down to 30 at the weekend. A count on Thursday 24th May only produced eight birds, though there are several active ringed plover nests. However the big news is that yesterday May...

June 4, 2018

We now have six nests and 13 eggs at the north end of the site – about 250 metres from the estuary where they more typically nest. We have erected a cordon and are working on electric fencing but badly need volunteer wardens. The chief threat is walkers and dogs...

Jul 7, 2018

We have had a mixed couple of weeks at Baltray. Early June we had nine nests with 23 eggs, one oystercatcher nest with two eggs and a dozen or so ringed plover nests in and around the enclosure. Of these three nests and six eggs were lost in a spring tide, though the oystercatcher nest survived and two chicks hatched on the 17th June. The little tern chicks started hatching 21st June but unfortunately a vixen with cubs raided and got three nests and four chicks. However in the following days two further nests were found. As of today we have at least 10 nests sitting and at least four chicks running around, probably more. Conditions look favourable for the current batch – the weather makes it look like a boom year with large numbers in other sites in the Irish sea.

Jul 10, 2018

Thanks to our Polish friends for the new signs on the beach. We still have ten birds sitting and at least three or four chicks running around. We managed to ring a few chicks last week. A large flock of rooks has started hanging around the north end. Foxes have been reported, particularly in the golf course.

Jul 11, 2018

A beaked whale washed up on the shore



Figure 1 Beaked whale

August 7, 2018

An extended survey of the overall site produced 6 adult and five sub-adult little terns, though these were adept flyers, so some may have dispersed from other sites in the Irish sea.

August 18th, 2018

An evening roost count on August 18th produced 28 little tern adults, 3 sub-adults, 42 common, three arctic and 55 roseate terns.

Sep 7, 2018

A roost of about 150 roseate terns and up to 300 other mixed terns was observed at the point. No little terns.

Dredging

Dredging was significant during the spring and summer of 2018 with early 100,000 tonnes dredged, and about 40,000 tonnes redeposited on the beach area for beneficial reuse (beach nutrition). Both the Argus and Sospan were in operation, with all of the dredge recovered through suction dredging.

Date	Tonnage dredged	
Feb-18	16,989	Sospan
Mar-18	38,281	Sospan
Summer 18	38,909	Argus

Dredging activities were continually observed through the summer at the bar.

Weather

While there were no significant winter storms apart from Storm Hector, which only had a limited effect this far south, the flow in the Boyne was low and the summer months were extremely dry and hot.

Conclusion

It looks like 2018 was a bonanza season for terns in the Irish sea with large numbers of chicks fledged at Groniant and Kilcoole despite problems with predators and storm Hector. Rockabill had a record number of roseate terns and it was reported that adults typically were able to find prey within a few minutes of leaving the nest site suggesting that the high productivity was a result of high productivity in tern prey (sprats, Atlantic herring, sand eels, pipefish). Baltray produced a max of 11 pairs, 8 of which nested a second time following storm Hector and some issues with a fox. We estimate a max of 7 chicks fledged (an episode with the removal of a minke calf from the beach did not help matters). Careful observations this year showed that the terns avoided the mouth of the estuary and inner basin, foraged exclusively out to sea, often flying a north easterly direction and returning at interval of around 30 minutes. The prey item was hard to discern but Atlantic herring was positively identified a few times. The low productivity may have been caused by a combination of weather effects, low Boyne flow and dredging.

Thanks again to all the volunteers, in particular Dominic Hartigan and Maurice Conaghy for all the work they did. And a big thanks to our sponsors and supporters, the Heritage Council, Birdwatch Ireland and Dublin Zoo.

Productivity 2018

	Max
Adults (breeding)	22
Nests	11
Chicks	7