

Baltray- Summary Report 2019

Little terns

Breffni Martin

5th September 2020 draft

13th march 2023 final

Flock Counts

Little Terns started to return to Co. Louth by 21st April when one was seen at Bellurgan Point by Tom Cooney, followed by two there on 23rd April. The last bird of the season was reported by Don Hodgers on 18th August at Clogher Head (www.irishbirding.com).

Maximum counts of Little Terns present at the Baltray colony were recorded as often as possible (preferably daily) from early May through to the end of the breeding season by early to mid-August. Towards the end of the season, the number of adults versus the number of fledged juveniles was also noted when possible. The main method of counting was direct counts, or those seen while flying over the nesting area or roosting during high tide.

The number of terns present fluctuated throughout the month of May, as is typical for the beginning of the breeding season as birds move about between potential nesting sites. Foraging terns were noted catching sand eels, sprat and fry along the Boyne river mouth usually on an incoming tide after which they would engage in courtship behaviour over the colony.

Peak counts of 100 birds were observed on 21st May and again a month later on 21st June. Flock counts included increasing numbers of fledged juveniles towards the end of July with upwards of 15 juveniles noted at any one time.

Table 1 . Select flock counts of Little Tern at Baltray during 2019. Juveniles refers to birds that are considered as fledglings/capable of flight.

Date	Total Birds	Adults	Juveniles
08/05/2019	40	40	0
13/05/2019	24	24	0
16/05/2019	34	34	0
21/05/2019	100	100	0
21/06/2019	100	100	0
22/06/2019	50	50	0
06/07/2019	60	60	0
07/07/2019	60	60	0
08/07/2019	80	80	0
09/07/2019	c.80	80	1
30/07/2019	35	30	5
31/07/2019	55	40	15

Breeding

The first eggs were laid sometime during the third week of May with 8 active nests counted on 22nd May. New nests continued to be discovered over the following days but numbers dropped in late May due to a depredation event by Red Fox. Numbers began to recover by late June when second clutch relays and/or new birds arriving into the colony caused numbers to swell. Further minor losses (corvid/fox) caused numbers to fluctuate again but several daily counts of over 30 active nests were recorded, the highest single daily count for active nests referring to 36 nests with 80 eggs on 26th June. With a prolonged period of nest loss and relaying it can be hard to ascertain the exact number of pairs involved.

Hatching began on 26th June and continued into late July. By 15th July some 55 chicks were known to have hatched successfully. Chick survival was thought to have been good as during the course of ringing, several large chicks of approximately 7, 10 or even 12 days old were found, including some re-traps of chicks ringed when young, confirming that survival rates thus far were favourable.

A fully fledged juvenile Little Tern was seen flying around with adults along the foreshore on 9th July. There is a chance that this may have been a bird that survived unnoticed from the initial first round of egg laying at Baltray in late May that was subsequently depredated by a Red Fox. However, it is thought that it is more likely to be a bird already fledged and dispersing from another site in the Irish Sea such as Gronant in North Wales where good early breeding success was recorded in 2019. It is not unusual for juvenile Little Terns to move away from their natal site very soon after fledging.

Table 2 Select counts for Little Tern nests, eggs and chicks recorded at Baltray during 2019.

Date	Active Nests	Eggs	Chicks	Fledglings
22/05/2019	8	8		
15/06/2019	16	32		
19/06/2019	29	58		
21/06/2019	31	70		
24/06/2019	?	80		
26/06/2019	36	83	1	
08/07/2019	30	nc	32	
15/07/2019	38	nc	55	
30/07/2019	nc	nc	nc	5
31/07/2019	nc	nc	nc	15

Conclusion

It is thought, with some degree of certainty, that at least 50 juvenile Little Terns fledged from the Baltray colony in 2019. Counts of 10-15 fledglings seen with the tern flock along the foreshore on several dates would support this. Juvenile Little Terns can spend up to two weeks at the natal colony but are quick to move on with departing adult birds. As such, the cumulative total of fledged juvenile terns at a colony site is rarely ever recorded. This is also influenced by the protracted and asynchronous nature of hatching dates at a colony that suffers losses and subsequent relays.