

Little Tern Conservation Project at Baltray.
2012 Report

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2012 Report for the Little Tern Conservation Project at Baltray, Co. Louth.



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Summary

- A team from Louth Nature Trust consisting of Sandra McKeever and Margaret Reilly (Joint Co-ordinators), Peter Phillips and Aine Walsh organised the Little Tern Conservation Project at Baltray in 2012.
- There were 33 breeding pairs this year (in contrast to 21 in 2007, 35 in 2008 and 43 in 2009 and 2010 and 49 in 2011). Due to the very early losses leading to movement to birds around different nesting sites, it is difficult to estimate the potential nesting pairs.
- 24 chicks fledged from Baltray (in contrast to 85 in 2011, 96 in 2010, 94 in 2009, 41 in 2007 and 29 in 2008). Though this is much lower than recent years, it is a good figure given the challenges faced this year.
- 45 eggs were predated, 41 lost to spring tides and 3 didn't hatch or were abandoned.
- 3 nests were outside the enclosed area and survived.
- The project is operated by Louth Nature Trust with €8,000 funding from the Heritage Council.
- A mixture of voluntary and paid wardening was used throughout the project.

Little tern summary 2012 project

	Breeding adult pairs	Nests	Eggs	Chicks
Total	33	71	116	25
Abandoned		1	2	
Infertile etc		1	1	
Lost to Tide		24	40	
Predated		30	47	
Hatched				25
Fledged				24

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Background

The little tern (*Sterna albifrons*) is Ireland's rarest breeding tern species with a population of around 200 pairs (Hannon et al. 1997). The little tern's nest is little more than a shallow scrape in the shingle in which they lay their eggs.

Having spent the winter off the west coast of Africa, little terns migrate to Europe to breed, arriving in Ireland from late April. A clutch of one to three eggs is laid in late May or June. The incubation period is around 21 days. At about 14 days chicks make their first attempts at flight, but do not fully fledge until about 28 days. Little terns leave their colony in August, departing Ireland in September.



Little Tern adult

Conservation

Threats to little terns include human disturbance, loss of suitable habitat and flooding from extreme tides and storms. Predation by foxes, hooded crows, magpies, rats and raptors is another significant threat to fragile breeding colonies. In some instances predation can reduce the breeding productivity to zero.

The 1984 and 1995 All-Ireland tern surveys showed that the number of breeding little terns had declined from 257 to 174 pairs. Recent estimates put the national breeding population at 250 pairs (Kilcoole little tern report, 2006)

Little terns are an Annex 1 species under the EU Birds Directive (79/409/EEC), thus EU member states are required to take special conservation measures to ensure that little terns remain at a favourable conservation status.

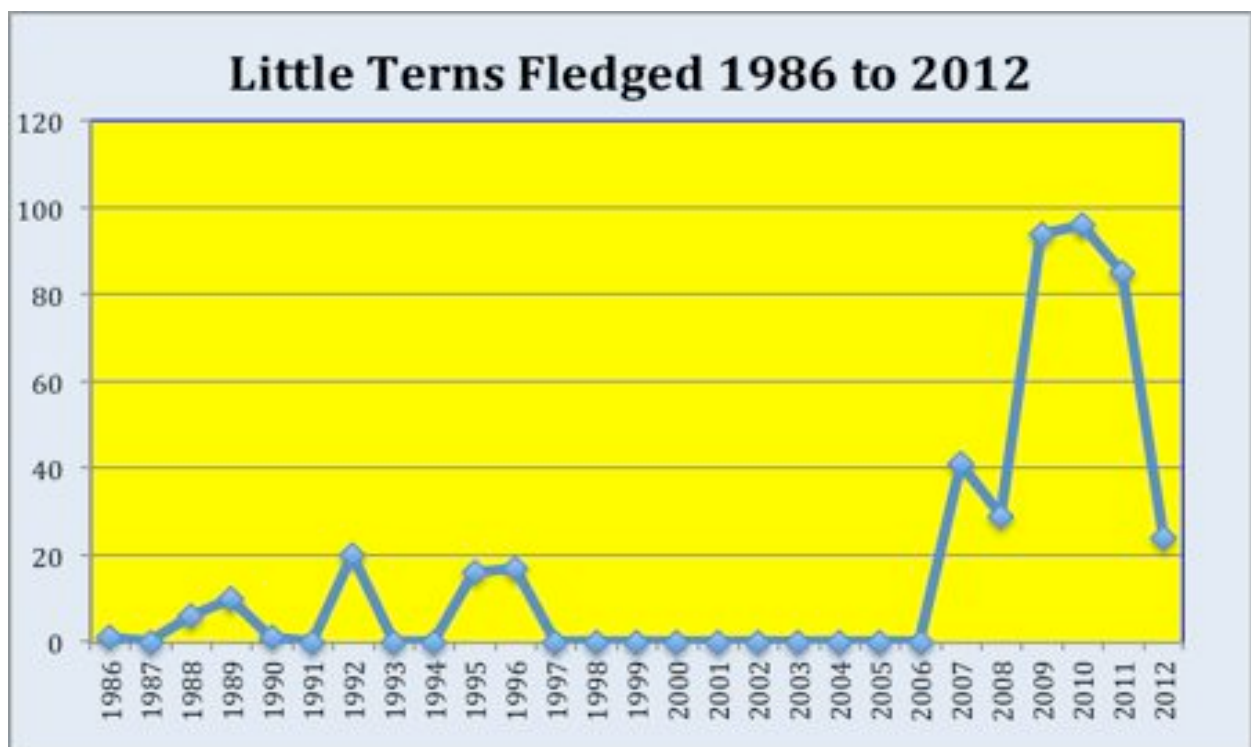
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They are also classified by BirdLife International as SPEC 3-: a 'Species with global populations not concentrated in Europe, but which have an unfavourable conservation status in Europe' (Tucker & Heath, 1994).

On a national level they are classified as a rare and localised breeder (Coveney et al., 1993) and as vulnerable (Whilde, 1993).

Introduction

Historically little terns at Baltray have undergone a series of extremely poor breeding seasons interspersed with productivity hovering just above zero - see fledged nos. chart below. Principally, breeding productivity of the colony was hampered by a combination of disturbance and predation by a range of nest predators. It is from this point that the project at Baltray began in 2007. This report will discuss the events at the project site and the management strategies employed to maximize the productivity of the little tern colony at Baltray during the 2012 project.



Site description

Little terns at Baltray breed in an area known as the Haven. The colony is situated within the boundary of the Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protected Area (SPA). As a consequence of winter storms the beach at the Haven changes dramatically year on year. A combination of vegetation encroachment and wave dynamics act together to shape the topography of the area. Embryo dune formation on the landward side, and erosion/undulation on the seaward side has limited the nesting site considerably this year so that it has changed dramatically and is approximately 500m long x 20m wide. The area suitable for nesting is much narrower than last year and borders the tideline. The entire site was observed for a

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week after the little terns began prospecting to see which areas they were favouring. They were using the entire shingle area, and it was decided to enclose most of it starting from close to the Boyne wall and stretching northward, to reduce the probability of breeding failure caused by mammalian predators and to protect them from human disturbance. The specific nest sites chosen did not have a particular pattern, i.e. little terns nested in high and low areas.



Map showing little tern project site

Ecology of little terns at Baltray

The little tern's nest is little more than a shallow scrape in the shingle in which they lay their eggs. They have very specific requirements for nesting and this area is suitable because of the presence of a ridge of shingle and its proximity to the river Boyne. They require fresh water fish to feed their young during the first few days of their life; they also require fresh water for drinking and bathing. Their chief prey is small fish - particularly sand eels, which they catch from the sea.

Project management

Site access

The local landowner provided us with keys to the gates, through which the breeding area of the shingle beach could be accessed. Since it is quite a distance to this site, the co-operation and support from the landowner was vital from a logistical point of view.

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Storage

A storage container was rented for the duration of the project and proved to be invaluable as we could safely leave equipment there which allowed the night time wardens to have access to necessary equipment such as torches and lamps.

Weather and shelter

2012 was a poor summer with higher than average rainfall. Temperatures were generally in the low to mid teens. A portacabin and portaloos were hired at the end of May when wardening began and retained until the end of August. This was essential as we put partial overnight wardening in place at that time.



Portacabin & storage container

Fencing

To alert the public, notices were erected at all approaches to the beach prior to the commencement of the project. Following a period of observation (to ascertain the most likely nesting area), fencing was erected on the 4th May. A string cordon was put on the outside the nesting area. 5' wooden posts were used along with blue baler twine, we used 8' posts on the seaside. We attached coloured streamers at intervals to make it more visible to the public.

A JCB dug a trench around the shingle area to be enclosed. The area was divided into two zones and each zone was enclosed separately, leaving a walkway between them.

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Green plastic mesh was used on the all but the east side of the enclosure. 5' posts were erected in the trench and 1m high plastic mesh was tie wrapped to the posts. The wire was buried approximately 6" in the trench and curved outwards to deter burrowing predatory animals. The mesh used was saved from the 2011 project. The string cordon went well further north than the actual nesting enclosure, this was very useful as it acted as a buffer zone so that people and dogs were well away from the nesting terns when they approached from the north side of the beach and this saved us having to go up there many times daily to ask people to keep a distance from the nesting birds.

Both of the enclosed zones were fenced with electric fencing, using 4 rows of six strand wire on the north, south and west sides and using seven rows on the east side as the electric fencing was the sole protection on this side. Plastic electric fence posts were used and these were easily inserted into the sand immediately outside the plastic mesh. The plastic posts were attached to wooden posts at intervals to strengthen them. Both of the zones had separate electrics fencer and these were securely placed in a waterproof bag and buried beneath the sand. Over-ground switches were discretely wired from the fencer to wooden posts and these were used for turning them on and off. As we could not get an earth on the beach, we set up every second row of wire as an earth and every other row as live. This meant that an electric shock would be administered when earth and live were touched at the same time. The electric fence was on at all times and checked at least once every day.

To prevent avian predators using the wooden posts as perches, we attached inverted cut plastic bottles on top of each post. Consequently if a bird attempted to land, the bottles would not support their weight - this worked very well as a deterrent.

Signage

Signs were prepared, and to cater for non-English speaking people, some were designed using symbols and pictures. These were erected at all entrances to the area, on the northern end of the beach and all around the nesting enclosure.

Two large 1m x 1m full colour interpretative signs were erected, one at the end of Baltray village at the approach to the Haven and the second further on at the main parking area beside the locked gate.

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Typical sign

Losses

Losses this year were

- 46 eggs in 29 nests were predated very early on the 17.06.12. When Maurice went out at 3.50am, he saw a fox in the southerly area of the nesting enclosure, close to the river. At that stage it had taken all but four of the nests. It would have gained entry from the east side as the electric fence was down due to high tides. One egg was predated at the end of May, predator unknown.
- One egg did not hatch.
- Two eggs in 1 nest were abandoned.
- Spring tides washed away 40 eggs in 24 nests on 02.06.12 and 06.07.12.
- A sparrowhawk took one adult little tern.

The fox predation on the 17.06.12 was the only one, other than one egg on the 31.05.12, predator unknown. This was due in large part to Maurice and Tony working together way above the call of duty to make sure the beach was wardened full time. The fox continued to be seen at varying times from 11pm to early morning.

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Little tern adult chasing away gull (photo by Andrew Kelly)

Threats and potential predators

Predator control: - Predator control continued this year with the help of experienced hunters. This started in early May but despite this, there were a lot of hooded crows in the area at the beginning of the project. Due in large part to the continued predator control and vigilance on the part of all the wardens, there were no predations by hooded crows. A fox was the main predator this year and continued to hunt in the area throughout the project.

Spring tides: - The spring tides are always a threat to the little tern colony. Electric fencing was the only fencing on the eastern side of the enclosure. A 'super moon' caused much damage to the fence on the the 6th May. Nesting had not started at this point in time. This was repaired by the volunteers on 12.06.12.

A full moon and high tides washed away all 13 nests with 24 eggs on the 02.06.12 and high tides continued to damage the fencing due in part to the close proximity of the nesting area to the high tideline. Tides again washed away 11 nests with 16 eggs on the 6th July.

The electric fencing on the east of the nesting enclosure could not be maintained due to both it's proximity to the tideline and due to the height of the tides.

Hooded crows: - These corvids are extremely adept predators and following on from the 2007 project when they predated 24 eggs in a single day, wardens were asked to be particularly vigilant in watching out for them. There seemed to be higher numbers when the project commenced but they were not particularly troublesome

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and seemed to keep away, perhaps knowing that they would not be tolerated in the area.

Dogs: - Almost all dogs were with their owners and we approached the owners in a friendly manner. We explained about the project and asked that the dogs be kept on leads when in the general area and to avoid the enclosed area of the beach altogether.

There was a huge amount of co-operation on this and most dog owners used a different route for the entire project. The volunteer presence was vital as we needed to approach dog owners on a daily basis as they either emerged on to the beach at the project entrance, or walked up the beach from the Termonfeckin area.

We noticed that when the volunteer warden was seen monitoring all movements in the area, most walkers with and without dogs then tended to veer away from the nesting area.

A red setter was seen regularly with no owner, running along the sea edge, chasing birds. At high tide the dog was uncomfortably close to the nesting enclosure but did not enter it at any stage.

Foxes: - We were very watchful for any traces of this predator, conscious that an entire colony of chicks could be wiped out in one night. Two separate zones were set up so that if a fox or other predator gained access to the enclosure, it would be restricted to that area only.

Unfortunately due to the continued damage to the eastern fencing, access to both nesting areas was easy and parts of the plastic mesh on the other sides of the nesting enclosure were very low due to sand blowing in on it.

A fox predated 29 nests with 46 eggs on the 17th of June. It continued to be seen periodically throughout the duration of the project and huge efforts were made by Maurice and Tony to ensure that no further eggs/chicks were lost to predation.

Stoats: - There was a family of stoats on the golf course at Baltray and have been seen in and around the nesting enclosure in previous years. None were seen in 2012. The smaller mesh this year should have stopped them entering the nesting enclosure.

Raptors: - Kestrels were seen in the area but the human presence most likely kept them at bay. While they flew over the enclosure, they seemed to hunt in the dunes. A sparrowhawk frequented the area and took one adult little tern.

Rooks: - Rooks didn't cause any particular problems this year.

Starlings:- Large flocks of starlings were daily visitors and for the most part, the little terns ignored them.

Other predators:- A couple of hedgehogs were found and re-located.

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Walkers: - We also had a huge amount of co-operation from walkers, many of whom changed their normal routes to completely avoid the area. Again the volunteer presence was essential and much time was spent in directing walkers away from the area. In spite of all the signage, some people approached the enclosure. It would be fair to say that over 95% of people co-operated when approached by the volunteers. Quite a few walkers walked up along the string cordon on the beach side, probably to avoid the soft sand and this disturbed the nesting birds. We used 8' posts on the east side which meant that we could put it further out from the enclosure. Walkers tend to walk right along the cordon so it should be put further out so that the nesting birds are not disturbed.



Newly born chick with unhatched egg

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Older Chick

Wardening

The first eggs were seen on the 31st of May and wardening began on the 28th May. Part time paid wardens covered some of the night hours. There was insufficient funding to put on all night wardening so we covered the hours thought to be most important from a predation point of view. These hours changed when a fox was seen predated at 3.50am when wardening was beginning that day. Along with some volunteers who covered some early morning hours, the paid wardens covered much of the night time hours, many of the hours unpaid. Maurice Conaghy and Tony Glass were the paid wardens and they were outstanding in their efforts to avoid a further predation by the rogue fox.

A cabin, storage container and portaloos were rented which were essential with the long hours of wardening.

The volunteer wardens were essential for the 9 am to 6 pm shifts and some were happy to do some later shifts which helped to eke out our funds over a longer period of time. The passion, dedication and commitment of these volunteers cannot be overstated. These people gave up their time, day in day out, week in week out, without complaint, their presence and co-operation was vital to the success of this project. The NPWS through their rangers gave much needed wardening time to the project. While our database of volunteers expands year on year, many are not available for one reason or another and the number of available volunteers has reduced making it difficult to get cover for every day. The availability of NPWS

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rangers for wardening made a huge difference to the running of the project and was very much appreciated.

The volunteer presence on the beach was essential. The hooded crows are very opportunistic and would fly in if the beach was unmanned. Some walkers would go inside the cordon if they thought that there was no-one around. It was clear to us that a presence was needed on the beach in close proximity to the enclosure so that immediate action could be taken at any moment, i.e. that the volunteers were within striking distance of any predator that appeared. Because of the length of the enclosure, it was difficult for one volunteer to adequately warden the area. With the encroaching vegetation, it is becoming more and more difficult to adequately monitor and warden the nesting enclosure.

Volunteers liaised with the public, gave updates on the project, kept walkers and their dogs away and watched out for and chased off predators such as hooded crows and rooks. Volunteers were not involved in monitoring the nesting, they stayed outside the cordon, only entering to chase predators and did not enter the enclosure. For the first time, a walk-way was left so that in emergencies, wardens could safely get to the east side of the beach and this worked well.

Monitoring

Monitoring is a very time consuming but important part of the project and was carried out by Sandra and Margaret and for the first time two volunteers with vast experience in bird watching (John Fox and Larry Lenihan and helped by Brendan Shields) also monitored. It was important to ascertain the losses as well as the successes. Knowing how many eggs were laid, how many were hatched, how many were lost and the reasons for those losses, was essential.

It began when the little terns started prospecting and courtship. Hours were spent observing them and noting possible nests. Nests were marked and co-ordinates taken so that they could be easily located by ourselves. The markers used were stones and debris already on the beach so that the nests would not be too easily seen by others and to prevent crows locating them. The nests were checked daily during the time that eggs were being laid. Because of predations, it was necessary to check the nests daily to ascertain if they were intact.

When hatching started, the nests were again checked daily until hatching was complete but disturbance was kept to a minimum. We observed nests daily to ensure that all nests were still being tended. Monitoring the numbers of chicks was much more difficult as they moved around on the beach and were hidden much of the time, and were therefore very difficult to locate. Binoculars and telescopes were invaluable for observing from a distance. As hatching continued it became impossible to do full counts on the chicks especially as they used seaweed washed in close to the enclosure and the vegetation to hide in. We therefore watched out for any incidents where predators might take chicks and checked the perimeter of the fence after spring tides to check for chicks that might have drowned.

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Adult with sand-eel

Numbers

Numbers of little terns present at Baltray built up to approximately 100. In July many other terns congregate on the beach and these are a mixture of sandwich, common, arctic and roseate terns.

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Nesting

The first nest was discovered on 31st May. There were 19 nests on the 2nd of June and 13 of these were washed away by tides. There were 33 nests on the 17th June and 29 of these were predated by a fox. The total number of nests was 71, of these 56 nests were lost and 15 hatched with 25 chicks. 24 chicks fledged.

The first chick hatched on the 6th June, there were 38 by the 18th and 89 at the end of the month with four eggs to hatch. The last two eggs hatched on the 24th July.

The chicks were impossible to count, the increasing vegetation makes the area very difficult to monitor.

Luckily the little terns are very noisy when threatened so wardens would be aware of a problem and check any potential predator around to see if it had taken a chick. We therefore assume that no chicks were lost to predators. After spring tides, we checked the seaside perimeter in case any chicks had drowned but again, none were found.

Notes & observations

A large area, approximately the same length as last year but much narrower, was enclosed at the beginning of the project this year. Because the narrow nesting area was right out at the tide line, it was very vulnerable to the tides. The electric fence on the seaside was repeatedly damaged by the tides and there was no point in trying to maintain it as the tides regularly washed in past it.

As in previous years, the cordon was far enough north to give a large buffer zone as that part of the beach can be busy with beach users entering and leaving from that area. During the nesting period, this section acted as a valuable buffer zone so that even though beach users may have been close to that section, they were still a good distance from the nesting birds. This reduced the amount of time spent by the wardens asking people to keep a distance from the nests.

Ringed plovers benefit greatly from the project as they also nest on the beach. Skylarks also benefit as they nest in the vegetation and our presence affords them protection from many predators.

Change in little tern behaviour when hatching commenced

As usual, the little terns became much more aggressive when their chicks had hatched and were less tolerant. It became necessary to keep a greater distance from the enclosure. They bombed the wardens on a number of occasions even though they were well outside the enclosure, they also swooped down on people even though they might be a considerable distance away.

Importance of preserving the first nests and eggs

It has been a priority to bring the first clutch of eggs to a successful fledging. 2007 and 2008 saw large predations of eggs while in 2009, 2010 and 2011, by and large, the first clutch of eggs was successfully hatched. This is important for a number of reasons:

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- The egg numbers tend to be higher in the first clutch i.e. two to three eggs, whereas there are generally less eggs laid in subsequent attempts i.e. one to two.
- If chicks fledge from the first laid clutch, they have longer to develop thereby giving them a much stronger chance of successful migration.
- Early hatching means that less eggs tend to be lost to spring tides.
- All our resources go into protecting the first clutch so full time wardening is in place when nesting begins. We do not have sufficient funding to continue the paid wardening until August, so if the first clutch is not successful, there will be a second laying which means that the project will run for a longer period of time but night time wardening could not be continued.

Chick movements & protection

The little tern chicks usually leave the nest after the second day and tend to move towards the eastern side of the enclosure and after about a week are likely to be found outside the it on the eastern and northern side, often moving inside the enclosure at night time or during full tides. While this seems to leave them vulnerable, there have been no losses from this behaviour and as it is clearly a strong instinct in both chicks and parents to move towards the sea, no preventative action will be taken to stop them.

Fencing issues

At the end of the 2008 project all netting wire went to the landfill as we found that it is not suitable for re-using. All new wire was used in 2009 and had become very rusted by the end of the project. We needed to source a different type of wire that could do the same job but that could be reused. Plastic mesh was used for the first time in 2011 and though it is not as strong as chicken wire, and more care had to be taken while erecting it, it worked well and was much easier to work with. All of it was re-usable in 2012, though the tides did cause some tearing. By and large the mesh should be good enough to re-use in 2013. Electric fence wire was re-used with the oldest put on the seaside. The seaside was separately stranded and then connected to the strands from the other three sides. This was done because the seaside is most likely to be damaged by spring tides and in that event, it would be quick and easy to disconnect.

The decision to use only electric fencing on the eastern side worked out well up until this year. We found that:

- Damage by spring tides was much less and was more easily and quickly repaired, thereby causing much less disturbance to the nesting birds.
- The taking down of the fence was much less work as there was no chicken wire to dig out of the sand.
- The little terns walk under the electric fencing, which does them no harm as they would need to touch two strands in order to get a shock, we need to consider this when trying to make the fencing as secure as possible. People tend to walk close to the string cordon and we will need to extend 'legs' on each end going out towards the sea along with signage so that walkers are encouraged to keep further away from the nesting enclosure. A lot of time was spent asking people, often with dogs to move away from the area.

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Expenditure

There was no funding from the NPWS again this year. This was due to cutbacks made to their budgets in the current very tough economic climate. The Heritage Council gave a grant of €8,000 which was used mostly for wardening wages and also for fencing materials, hire of cabin, storage container and portaloo, hire of JCB and all other project costs.

Human resources

The volunteers were exceptionally generous with giving their time to the project, but the drain on their time was huge. Quite a few volunteers were not available for the 2012 project and we found that we could not cover all the necessary hours with the volunteers available. Dr. Maurice Eakin of the NPWS made himself and the local rangers available and the hours that they gave to the project were invaluable.

With the grant from the Heritage Council, part time wardens were employed to cover from as many night hours as possible. Volunteers covered from 9am to 6pm. There were a couple of volunteers who covered an evening shift which helped to eke out the funds. The paid wardens worked many hours more than they were paid for, such was their commitment to the success of the project.

We felt that the hire of a cabin, storage container and portaloo, was necessary for the comfort and security of the wardens.

Louth Nature Trust.

Louth Nature Trust was incorporated in February 2008. It is a Company Limited by Guarantee and not having a Share Capital. It has Charity Status with the Revenue Commissioners. The Little Tern Conservation Project is run through Louth Nature Trust and was the main reason for its foundation.

Information and publicity.

In addition to the signage around the area of the project:

- With the setting up of Louth Nature Trust, a web site (www.louthnaturetrust.org) was designed and a Blog set up to inform people of the progress of the Little Tern Conservation Project. This proved an effective means of communication with the wider public.
- Peter Phillips of Louth Nature Trust gave a talk and ran a little tern art competition in three local national schools. This was sponsored by Coca-Cola and generated much interest in the project. The winning posters were displayed on our web site.
- The Haven, Baltray is now an established site on the East Coast for viewing the terns and other sea birds. A Northern Ireland Ornithology group visited the site at least four times, we also had birdwatchers from Normandy, France as well as many Southern Irish birdwatchers.

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Film crew for the RTE Zoo series.



Minister Gormley viewing the little terns with Sandra & Margaret in 2009

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Acknowledgements.

Thanks are due to Pdraig Comerford, Maurice Eakin and the NPWS rangers for the time given to the project.

Funding from the Heritage Council was greatly appreciated and allowed us to have some paid wardens. This played a large part in the success of the project.

Thanks to the Hartigan family for giving us access to the beach through their land - Anne Hartigan who owns the land and her son Dominic who liaised with us. We were facilitated in every way possible and they couldn't have been more helpful.

Thanks also to Dublin Zoo and Coca-Cola International Services for their continued sponsorship and to the people who made private donations.

A huge thanks is due to all the volunteers who gave their time over the three months and to those who helped erect and dismantle the fencing:

Maurice Conaghy, Tommy Reilly, Mick Reade, Kieran Campbell, Andrew Kelly, Larry Lenehan, Willie Connell, Paddy Burke, Mick Conaghy, Tony Glass, Tony Brockwood, Nicola Carroll, Brendan Shiels, Eamonn Hanratty, Niall Harmeay, Maurice Eakin, Annette Lynch, John Fox, Vincent Hall, Anneliese Durant, Sylvia O'Hehir, Billy Clarke, Patricia Fuentes, Len & Patricia Johnson, Ray McIlhenny, Matt Byrne, Anto Kerins, Mark Johnson, Sean Smith, Adele Tobin, Dave McPherson, Irene Bagnall, Brendan Carthy, Ken, Ray, Ita, also Malta Services plus the Organising Team who are listed on page one.



Tony & Ray - picnic break during fence dismantling Aug 2012

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A special mention for:

Maurice Conaghy who looked after the predator control and whose help and expertise were vital to the success of the project.

Tommy Reilly who managed all fencing issues and carried out repairs to the fences. Malta Services, Drogheda, a day service for adults with intellectual disabilities. They provided a team of supervised volunteers twice a week.

Dempsey Mullen who provide accountancy services.



Dismantling fence Aug 2012

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Important Announcement.

Sandra and I have jointly co-ordinated the project since it began six years ago. In the 10 years preceding the project, the little tern breeding success was at zero. In the six years of the project **a total of 369 little terns have fledged.** These are statistics of which we are very proud.

We made it known at the beginning of this year's project that this would be the last year that we would manage it, it is time for others to take on the mantle. We look forward to continuing our involvement but only as volunteer wardens.

Louth Nature Trust

September 2012

This project was funded by the Heritage
Council under the Heritage Management



Grant Scheme 2012.