

## Becoming a Little Tern Volunteer Warden

### 1.0 Welcome to the team!

On behalf of the staff from Denbighshire Countryside Services and the North Wales Little Tern Group we would like to welcome you to the warden team. The role you play is crucial to the maintenance of the Little Tern colony and any time you are willing to donate to protect these amazing little birds is always appreciated.

We rely on our volunteers, and without you the colony would not be as successful as it has been in recent years. Because of the work of our on-site wardens, the Little Tern colony at Gronant became the largest colony in the UK. This is in itself a testament to the hard work that has been done in recent years and it has become a privilege to be involved in such a wonderful project.

### 1.1 About Little Terns



The Little Tern is the second rarest breeding seabird in the UK and Gronant is their last stronghold in Wales. The species is protected under Schedule 1 of the *Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981*, under Annex 1 of the *EC Birds Directive* and is Amber listed in *The Birds of Conservation concern*. Human disturbance and coastal development has contributed most to their consistent decline and loss of nesting colonies over the last 50 years. Predation from kestrels, foxes and sparrowhawks can also have dramatic effects on nesting success from year to year, so too can high tides and bad weather. Most local residents and visitors to the beach are neither aware of the importance of this colony to the UK, or the factors that threaten their survival.

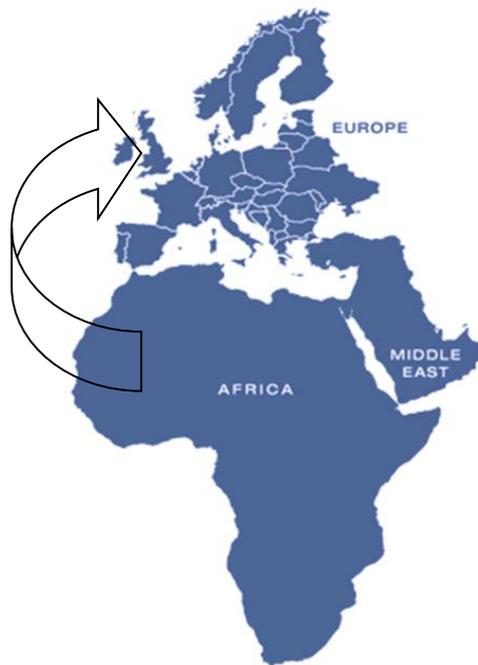
The EU funded LIFE+ Little Tern Recovery Project is a partnership project between Denbighshire Countryside Services, the RSPB and 9 other beneficiaries and aims to understand the decline of the Little Tern through research, enabling the development of management best practise. It also aims to increase local and national awareness of Little Tern conservation in the UK to ensure public sympathy and support at key project sites.

The terns at Gronant are protected by almost 2 miles of electric fencing. The fencing is intended to keep out terrestrial predators, such as Foxes, stoats, and even hedgehogs that will happily make a

meal of the Little Tern eggs. However, the fences will not keep out threats from the air such as crows and kestrels which prey on adult little and their chicks. The kestrel is the biggest threat to the colony at Gronant, responsible for a high fatality of chicks each season.

Little Terns arrive at Gronant at the end of April after traveling nearly 3,000 miles from the west coast of Africa. After a short period of feeding to regain their weight the adults will start to pair up for breeding. When a suitable mate has been found the female will lay 2-3 eggs accounting for around a third of her body weight (that is a lot for a bird that weighs as little as a standard packet of crisps!) in a shallow depression in the sand called a scrape. Eggs will take 18-22 days to hatch. After the eggs have hatched the chicks are unable to maintain their own body temperature. They stay warm by huddling under the parents.

The adults will periodically bring food such as sand eels to feed them on. After 4-5 days the chicks will leave the nest and can be seen wandering around the shingle, where the adults continue to feed them. Chick's will fledge 12-14 days after hatching, and will even be able to fly short distances at this point. At around 18-20 days old the fledglings can be seen forming small groups or a *Creche*, at this point the fledglings can be seen flying with the adult birds, learning to fish for themselves and preparing for the long flight back to Africa! Around the end of July to the beginning of August adults and fledglings begin their long migration back to over winter on the west coast of Africa.



*Little Tern migration from Africa*

## **2.0 Volunteer Warden Duties**

The general day to day involvement of a volunteer warden is incredibly varied depending on what stage of the breeding cycle is currently in effect and, what duties the on-site warden wishes to be carried out. Radios are available and it is recommended to carry one when on site so you can stay in touch with the warden wherever you are. If you are flexible with when you come down to the site then check the volunteer calendar at <https://teamup.com/ksnjzmzfz533zvsa48> and choose a time when there are no other volunteers down so you can help out when you are most needed. Alternatively if time is restricted you are welcome to come down any time that suits you. This calendar is also a useful way of seeing whether there are any events on. Please add your name to the calendar so that the warden knows how much support to expect. The following paragraphs detail the range of tasks available to volunteer wardens.

### **2.1 Nest location/nest marking**

Locating nests is a very important duty, and the on-site warden will train you on how to efficiently perform the task with minimal disturbance to the birds. We mark each nest with a colour coded bamboo cane. Due to licensing however, this activity cannot be performed on your own and you must be accompanied by an on-site warden whenever entering/disturbing the colony.

#### **2.1.1 LIFE+ Nest monitoring**

Part of the LIFE+ monitoring scheme requires a visual observation of individual nests on a daily basis for;

- Adults brooding eggs
- How often the adults return with food for their mates?
- How often (if at all) do the adults change incubation roles?
- How often do the adults return with food to feed chicks?
- At how many days do chicks leave the scrape?

This can be a very interesting and rewarding activity as it simply requires observing birds from a distance. This can reveal intricate social interactions between adults during mating, incubation and brooding, and also interactions between different pairs nesting relative to each other.

If you think this would interest you please speak to the on-site warden for full training and details on how to record the information on the data sheets.

### **2.2 Coordinated Counts**

Once in June and once in July there is a coordinated count as part of the EU Life+ programme which attempts to count the total number of AON's (apparently occupied nests) and/or number of adults at all of the project sites. This is in addition to the information sent by the wardens from their regular monitoring of totals of nests and adults. This is a good opportunity to get involved with the scientific side of the Little Terns. Dates of the counts are announced in advance to members of the North Wales Little Tern Group and on social media (Facebook and Twitter).

### **2.3 Deterring predators**

During times of intense pressure from Kestrels or Crows there will be a need for volunteers to assist wardens in deterring predators. This will involve being stationed at a point in the dune near the colony and when the predator is sighted either scaring it away by just walking/running towards it or firing off a blank round using a starter pistol.

### **2.4 Visitor engagement and manning the visitor centre.**

A key role is speaking to and enthusing the visitors to the visitor centre or beach. Introduce yourself and explain a little what the project is about. If there is a nest visible then try and show the visitors the birds through the telescope, this is a great way for people to connect with the birds and enjoy them. If people are showing good interest then please inform them about the chance to get involved either through volunteering or by joining the North Wales Little Tern Group (leaflets in the visitor centre). Spending time on site and at the visitor keeps the structures safe and a human presence can deter some people from causing harm.

### **2.5 Maintaining electric fencing**

Keeping the electric fencing well maintained and clear of debris particularly after high tides is a priority so it retains its ability to carry an electric current when switched on at night. Around the monthly high tides there is likely to be a need to carry out this task as a group so that it can be completed quickly and the disturbance caused is minimal. The dates of the monthly high tides are available in the tide time chart in the visitor centre and are marked on the online volunteer calendar. If it is perceived that a particularly high tide is imminent a call may go out on E-mail, Facebook and Twitter for assistance.