

Roseate Tern LIFE Project

Roseate Terns on Rockabill, Co Dublin, in summer 2016. **Photograph:** Brian Burke

Daniel Piec, Stephen Newton and Paul Morrison report on a great new partnership

The Roseate Tern LIFE project started in October 2015 and got off to a great start in its first nesting season, with almost 2,000 pairs nesting across Britain and Ireland in 2016. The principal partners in this five-year project are **RSPB, BirdWatch Ireland** and the **North Wales Wildlife Trust**, with work extending across Britain, Ireland and France.

The work includes wardening, nestbox provision, predator management and island biosecurity at the principal colonies – located in Rockabill, Co Dublin; Lady's Island Lake, Co Wexford; Coquet Island off Amble on the Northumberland coast, northeast England; and in Brittany, France.

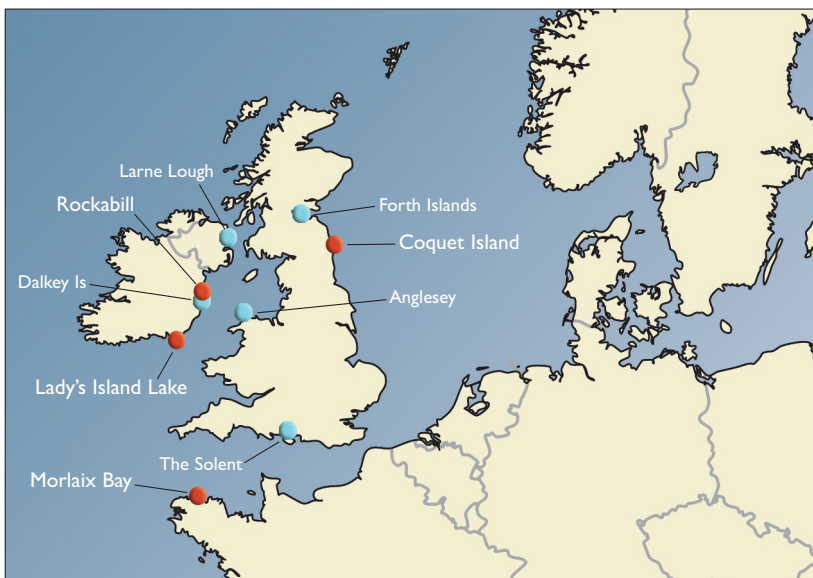
Work is also being undertaken in all other Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for Roseate Terns, to improve habitat condition and encourage recolonisation by Roseates, while also protecting their Common and Arctic Terns. These sites include the Forth Islands (Scotland); Anglesey (Ynys Feurig, Cemlyn Bay and Skerries), (Wales); Larne Lough (Northern Ireland); and the Solent, beside the Isle of Wight (England).

We are also conducting a long-term assessment of management options throughout the Roseate Tern's European range, taking into consideration climate change and other drivers.

We will be looking into demographic processes for each of the main colonies, and testing GPS and boat-tracking methods in preparation for next season. We have also commissioned a survey of wintering Roseates in Ghana, including a re-assessment of the trapping issue.

It was a record year for Roseates on Rockabill, with 1,556 pairs, continuing the upward trend there. Elsewhere, 209 pairs bred on Lady's Island Lake. The only viable UK colony – the RSPB-managed Coquet Island – supported 104 pairs, while in France there was an increase from 32 pairs to 50 pairs. Overall, for the whole of northwest Europe, there was an increase of 9% on 2015 numbers.

Daniel Piec, RSPB Roseate Tern LIFE Project Manager



Roseate Tern colonies in Europe (red) and where we hope to restore them (blue). In France, Roseates breed in mixed tern colonies in Brittany (the main one is Île aux Dames, Morlaix Bay). **Note:** Roseate Terns are found right across the globe, though everywhere in small numbers. Colonies in Ireland support most of the European population.



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Roseate Terns doing well in Ireland

When BirdWatch Ireland began its Roseate Tern conservation work back in 1989, Ireland had just 200 pairs. What a long way we have come!

Rockabill

The additional funds from the EU LIFE project are enabling us to increase the number of nest boxes on Rockabill and replace broken ones, and to create new tern terraces on the island so that more birds can nest.

About half of the pairs nest in boxes, with the rest out in the open. Over the years, we have found that the box-nesting pairs lay larger clutches and raise more chicks than the birds exposed to the elements.

Breeding results

Although the numbers nesting on Rockabill were at a record high (at 1,556 pairs), the number of young raised per pair – at an average of 0.66 – was down on last year.

Given that the mean clutch size (number of eggs) was 1.68, it appears that each pair lost one egg or chick.

Identifying the reasons why is not easy, but could include large gulls feeding on eggs; heavy downpours at hatching time; and a shortage of fish prey (though our observations at Rockabill showed that the parents were bringing fish to their chicks at about the normal rate).

Lady's Island Lake

The Lady's Island Lake colony is managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Roseate Tern numbers there were slightly down on 2015 but, at 209 pairs, this remains the second largest colony in Europe.

Breeding results

The mean clutch size was 1.43, with productivity at 1.08 young per pair – much better than at Rockabill (at 0.66). One reason why they may have had a better year is that virtually all of the pairs nested in boxes.

Dalkey Island

The third Irish colony involved in this EU LIFE project is Dalkey Island in south Dublin. It held 97 pairs of Arctic Terns this year; plus eight pairs of Common Terns, and happily, after an absence last year, a single pair of Roseate Terns (which made a breeding attempt).

During the summer, the South Dublin Branch ran its annual tern watch from the mainland at Coliemore Harbour, opposite the islands (about 300 m offshore). Hundreds of people came along to see the terns.

Breeding results

The Dalkey colony had very poor breeding success this year (like many tern colonies in the north Irish Sea). Mysteriously, most of the chicks disappeared in late June.

We will work to improve the site for all terns next year. Actions may include a rat eradication programme on Dalkey Island and adjacent Lamb Island, where most of the terns nest; the two are connected at low tide.

Stephen Newton, BirdWatch Ireland Senior Conservation Officer (Seabirds)



Roseate Tern incubating eggs on Rockabill, summer 2016. **Photograph:** Brian Burke

Coquet reaches 100!

Coquet Island, situated off the Northumberland coast, is the only regular UK breeding colony of Roseate Terns.

Following an exchange visit to Rockabill in 2000, terracing and nest boxes were introduced to Coquet the following season. The impact was immediate and the trend of falling numbers halted. Subsequent years saw a steady increase from 34 nesting pairs to triple figures in 2015 and 2016.

Adjustments to the management of Coquet have been introduced, including minimising disturbance; providing better habitat for terns; adding shingle to the terraces; and putting in place round-the-clock safeguards against egg thieves.

The Roseate Tern LIFE programme added extra support for these efforts, enabling the purchase of a purpose-built

hide for RSPB staff to conduct night watches during the incubation period.

Also funded was a live video stream to the internet, giving visual access to the bird spectacle without disturbance – thousands of people enjoyed the antics of the terns and Puffins on the terraces. Do check it out next year at www.rspb.org.uk/coquetlive.

Breeding results

With bad weather in late spring, many of the Common and Arctic Tern nests on Coquet failed, as eggs chilled in the rain. Better weather in late summer gave them a second chance and birds re-laid everywhere, even on the paths. The Roseate Tern numbers held, with 104 nesting pairs producing 91 fledglings – a reasonable productivity index of 0.88.

Paul Morrison, RSPB Reserve Manager



Part of the tern colony on Lamb Island, Dalkey, where a pair of Roseates made a breeding attempt this year. **Photo:** A Butler