



Roseate Tern with sprats at the Rockabill tern colony in July. **Photo:** Brian Burke

Highs and lows of tern season

The Roseate Tern colony on Rockabill has had another good year and the migrations of some of its birds over the last year have been revealed. **Dr Stephen Newton** reports on this and news from other tern colonies.

Rockabill Roseate Tern colony

Rockabill is the most important breeding colony for **Roseate Terns** in Europe. It also holds important numbers of **Common** and **Arctic Terns**.

The long, hot, dry summer has not been overly stressful for Rockabill's terns: chick survival has been excellent and prey fish seem abundant – some birds

have been seen bringing in multiple fish (*see photo*) in a similar manner to Puffins.

As regards breeding numbers, we have provisional estimates of the number of breeding pairs for each of the three species at the colony: **Roseate Tern** – 1,633 pairs (1,603 in 2017); **Common Tern** – 2,044 pairs (probably an underestimate, but up on 2,035 in 2017); **Arctic Tern** – 53 pairs

(27 in 2017). Overall, the numbers indicate a reasonably stable population.

Other Roseate Tern colonies

Roseate Tern numbers at the other two principal colonies, **Lady's Island Lake**, Co Wexford, with *circa* 210 pairs, and **Coquet Island**, off Northumberland, England, with 116 pairs, are also relatively stable.

Lady's Island has had a fairly turbulent season, with a Pine Marten taking some adults and chicks early on. Later, an American Mink was trapped after eight adults and 22 Roseate Tern chicks (plus many more Arctic Tern chicks) were killed in one night.

Over in **Brittany, France**, following the introduction of a new regime of nest-box deployment based on the methods used in Ireland and Coquet, there are encouraging signs that a significant number of

pairs are happy with the new accommodation provided.

Final counts from all of the Roseate Tern colonies will be included in the next issue of *Wings*.

Dalkey Island terns

It has been a very poor year for breeding terns at Dalkey Island in south Co Dublin, where the terns nest mainly on two rocky islets: Lamb Island and Maiden Rock.

In both 2016 and 2017 we had in excess of 100 pairs of **Arctic Terns** nesting on Lamb Island alone, albeit with poor success. This year, we have had no more than 28 pairs of **Common** and **Arctic Terns** laying clutches, in nests spread across three islands. Some chicks hatched and survived for a short period but by July 6-7th all remaining eggs and young had disappeared.

We observed a pair of **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** "loitering



Stephen Newton and team ringing terns on Rockabill. **Photo:** Brian Burke

with intent" on several occasions and these look the most likely cause of this year's failure.

East Coast Little Terns

(1) Kilcoole. The **Little Tern** colony at Kilcoole, Co Wicklow, is the centrepiece of our **Little Tern Conservation Project** and we are grateful to the **National Parks and Wildlife Service** for funding the wardening of the site, a project now in its 34th year:

It has changed over the years: initially it was a voluntary effort but it has evolved into a round-the-clock effort sustained for more than 2½ months, from first eggs in mid-May through to flying young at the end of July.

In 2018 we reached a peak nest count of 142 on the morning of June 13th, just before Storm Hector hit in the evening and, combined with spring tides, resulted in the loss of 42 nests to the waves.

Nevertheless, most of the surviving nests have hatched chicks and a good proportion of these have been colour-ringed with 'Irish green' engraved rings.

Some pairs, post-storm Hector, re-laid new clutches and on July 13th we still had 44

active nests.

A pair of Kestrels raided the colony regularly in mid-July, taking some well grown chicks, so trying to distract or scare off these hunting falcons was a regular activity for the wardens.

(2) Baltray. A small number of pairs of **Little Terns** returned to Baltray, County Louth, after a two-year absence. **Louth Nature Trust** volunteers have been monitoring the colony and they believe between nine and 12 pairs are involved. Storm Hector and fox predation affected their breeding success, though some young had fledged and a few more had hatched by the 19th of July.

(3) Portrane. A little further south at Portrane in north County Dublin a committed team of **Fingal Branch** volunteers and friends have been safeguarding this relatively new Little Tern colony. Eleven pairs are present as I write and, although some nests were lost to Storm Hector and to dogs roaming off the lead, four young have fledged and a further ten well grown young from five re-laid clutches are presently running around the beach ■



An Roinn
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Common Tern on nest at Rockabill this summer. Photo: Brian Burke



Roseate Tern being fitted with tag.

PAUL MORRISON

Tagged terns reveal migrations

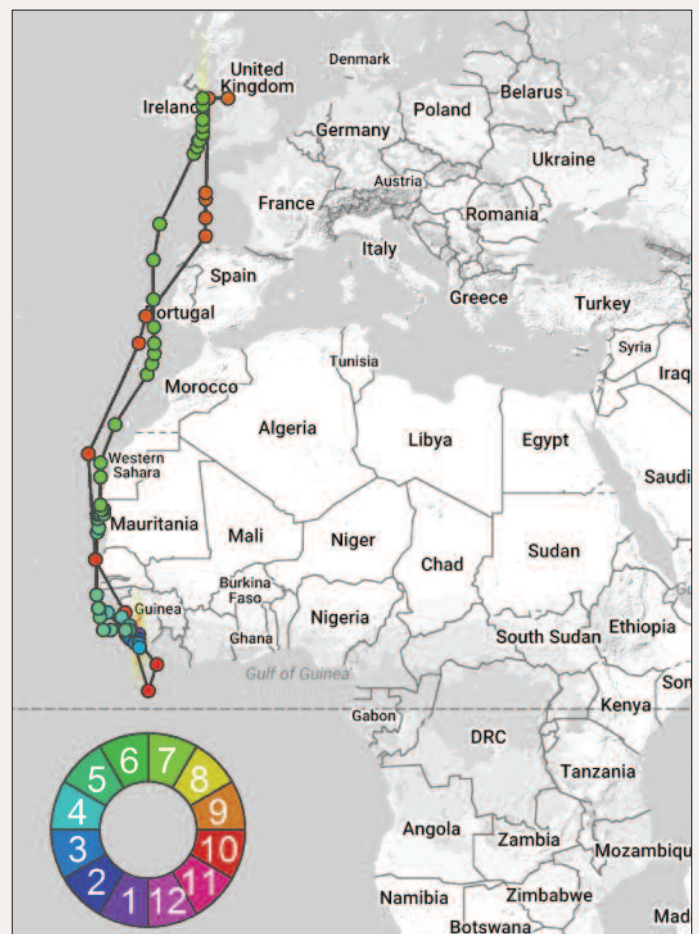
The other important news from this season is that we have recovered fifteen out of twenty geolocator tags that were deployed on breeding adult Roseate Terns on Rockabill, Co Dublin, in June 2017.

These tags have measured daylength and the time of dawn and dusk every day relative to Greenwich Mean Time for a year; and hence we have been able to deduce the approximate whereabouts of the fifteen individuals during that time, including on their migrations between Ireland and West Africa.

We have been able to draw preliminary movement maps for seven of the birds and several key points have emerged. Southbound (September-October) and northward (April-early May) migration is very rapid and, secondly, the final winter destinations in West Africa fall into two clusters, one centred on coastal and offshore Ghana and the other around Guinea, one thousand kilometres west of Ghana.

Most birds appear to spend some of the winter period offshore (see map), which hints that they may not be returning to land to roost each evening.

As part of the **Roseate Tern LIFE Project**, our RSPB colleagues on Coquet Island, off Northumberland, have fitted a further twenty geolocator tags to Roseate Terns and a major comparative analysis of North Sea versus Irish Sea Roseate Tern annual movements will be initiated next summer ■



The movements of one of the Roseate Terns tagged at Rockabill last year, showing its migration south in the autumn, its wintering in Guinea and its return journey in the spring of this year. The key shows the colour corresponding to each month. Map: Attribution??