



Irish-ringed Little Tern resighted in West Africa

BirdWatch Ireland's colour-ringing programme on Little Terns at Kilcoole, Co Wicklow, has produced its first resighting from West Africa. **Stephen Newton** reports

Since the **Kilcoole Little Tern protection scheme** kicked off in 1985 on the pebble beach at Kilcoole, Co Wicklow, we have ringed many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Little Tern chicks at the colony. This has helped us to work out the chick survival rates and fledging success.

Until now, however, the ringing has yielded little information on where these terns go in winter. A tiny handful of recoveries (birds found dead or deliberately trapped for food or sport) has come from West African countries such as Sierra Leone.

However, in 2014 we started adding a plastic colour ring (see photo, below) to the chicks' legs, in addition to the much smaller national metal ring. Colour rings can be read using a telescope or binoculars, so recapture is not required to learn a bird's history. We hoped this would yield information on the migratory routes and final winter destinations of our Little Terns.

Five years into the colour-ringing programme we have learned a lot about where they go as they leave the Irish Sea in August/September. Some

are seen in Wales and south-west England before they head to the coast of Brittany in France. The next cluster of resightings comes from north-west Spain and Portugal...but there the trail goes cold.

A couple of weeks ago, however, Dutch ornithologists working for the Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research on the Banc d'Arguin, in Mauritania, West Africa, contacted us to say they had seen Little Tern 'IOH' while ringing Red Knots and Bar-tailed Godwits at this internationally important wintering site for Palearctic waders.

We ringed IOH as a chick at Kilcoole on June 17th, 2017, and retrapped it there two days later, when we added the colour ring. Some six weeks later it was sighted on a beach at Gronant, North Wales. IOH was not seen at either Kilcoole or Gronant during the summer of 2018, but then, on December 11th, 2018, ornithologist Bob Loos found it at the Banc d'Arguin in Mauritania.

It would be a joy to find it breeding at Kilcoole this summer: our tern wardens will keep us posted! ■

How did the Little Terns fare at Kilcoole in 2018?

The **Kilcoole Little Tern protection scheme** clocked up its 33rd year in 2018, and yet again it was a good year for the terns, with a breeding population of 142 pairs. By comparison, the colony held 141 nesting pairs in 2017 and 143 in 2016, so it's holding up well.

Assessing how well the colony is doing in raising young is a much more difficult task, as the highly camouflaged chicks range over a ridged shingle beach, approximately 500 metres in length. It is well-nigh impossible to see them all from one position, especially as the chicks squat down in the pebbles and only move when their parents approach them with food.

On top of that, the 2018 season was totally disrupted by Storm Hector in mid-June, which split the season in half. We ended up with two 'waves' of young tern fledglings, one in mid-July, the other in early August.

We ended up with two figures: a potential maximum (the number of chicks hatched minus the number of known chick deaths) and a minimum figure, which was the number of successfully fledged terns that we observed at the site. These two figures were 234 and 97, respectively. Applying our algorithm, we concluded that 1.17 chicks had been reared per nesting pair in the 2018 season – a fairly good result.

Ringling the terns

We try our best every year to ring all Little Tern chicks at Kilcoole, and 2018 marked the fifth year that we added a second ring, a plastic, coloured ring (green with white letters and numbers), to as many well-grown chicks as possible, along with the usual light metal ring. Colour rings make for easier tracking of the birds.

The use of colour rings is really expanding our knowledge of how Little Terns move around the Irish Sea, and our knowledge of their migration route towards their wintering area in West Africa is growing.

This year, we found 28 terns, previously colour-ringed as chicks, appearing at the Kilcoole colony: one was two years old, fifteen were three years olds and twelve were four years old. Apart from one, all had been ringed by us at Kilcoole. The odd-one-out came from the 'sister' colony at Baltray, Co Louth.

We also know that three of 'our' three-year-olds and one four-year-old bred at the Gronant colony in north-east Wales.

Once the early batch of young were on the wing in late July, they, too, started to explore the Irish Sea: six were seen at Portrane, north Co Dublin, and seven called in at Gronant in Wales. Remarkably, one youngster was seen at both sites, three days apart. – **Stephen Newton**



An Roinn
Cultúir, Oidhreacht agus Gaeltachta
Department of
Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

EU LIFE Nature project 'LIFE14NAT/UK/000394' is supported by the National Parks and Wildlife Service

Little Tern fitted with rings at Kilcoole, Co Wicklow. **Photograph:** Cathal Forkan

