

Sandwich tern: species information for marine Special Protection Area consultations

The UK government has committed to identifying a network of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) in the marine environment by 2015. Natural England is responsible for recommending SPAs in English waters to Defra for classification. This and other related information notes have been prepared and will be available at meetings and online so that anyone who might be interested in why the SPA is being considered for classification can find out more about the birds that may be protected. For more information about the process for establishing marine SPAs see TIN120 *Establishing Marine Special Protection Areas*.

Background

The Birds Directive (EC Directive on the conservation of wild birds (2009/147/EC) requires member states to identify SPAs for:

- rare or vulnerable bird species (as listed in Annex I of the Directive); and
- regularly occurring migratory bird species.

The sandwich tern, *Sterna sandvicensis*, is listed under Annex I of the Birds Directive. They are between 36 and 41 cm long with a wingspan of 95-105 cm¹. Their typical lifespan is 12 years and the oldest recorded individual was over 30 years old².

Conservation status

- SPEC 2 (concentrated in Europe and with an unfavourable conservation status)³;
- listed in Annex 1 of EU Birds Directive (rare and vulnerable species in Europe); and
- UK amber-listed bird of conservation concern⁴.



Sandwich tern © Andy Mason

Distribution and population

Sandwich terns breed in Europe, west Asia and North and South America, including next to land-locked seas in Europe and Asia. European birds spend the northern winter in the Caspian, Black and Mediterranean Seas and off the coasts of western and southern Africa⁵.

They have a scattered distribution along the UK coast, but are highly concentrated in a small number of colonies on traditional sites.

Colonies, particularly smaller ones, may be used sporadically or suddenly abandoned.

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UK population

The Seabird 2000 census recorded 12,500 apparently occupied nests – 9.6% of the global population⁶. In England there were 9,018 apparently occupied nests recorded between 1998-2002⁷.

Breeding

Sandwich terns nest colonially in high densities on the ground, on dunes, shingle spits and ridges, and low offshore islands, often in association with black-headed gull colonies and where disturbance is limited.

They make a shallow depression on sand, shingle or low vegetation, where 1-2 eggs are laid.

Migration/movements

Sandwich terns are a long-distance migrant in the UK, with many UK breeding birds spending the northern winter in west African coastal waters, where young birds remain until 2 or 3 years old. They return to UK waters from early March and to colonies from April. They leave their colonies as soon as the young have fledged. From July onwards they start gathering in large flocks before departing for Africa by late September⁸.

Foraging

Sandwich terns hunt alone or in small loose flocks. They plunge-dive to seize fish from the top of water column, often following spells of hovering. They usually dive to no more than 2 m depth. In flight they can also seize prey from just below the water surface⁹.

Sandwich terns feed on small to medium-sized fish, particularly sandeels, herring and sprats, although their diet is more varied than other terns. They can also take small squid and crustaceans.

They prefer to forage in shallow inshore waters and the outer reaches of estuaries as well as shallower waters or sandbanks further offshore.

Their foraging range varies between colonies and with season. A maximum foraging distance

of 54 km has been recorded. The mean of all the maximum foraging ranges recorded by different studies is 49 km¹⁰.

References

¹ The Birds of the Western Palearctic (Snow and Perrins, 1998)

² BTO Bird Facts website - www.bto.org/about-birds/birdfacts

³ Birds in the European Union: a status assessment (BirdLife International, 2004)

⁴ Birds of Conservation Concern 3: the population status of birds in the United Kingdom, Channel Islands and the Isle of Man (Eaton *et al*, British Birds Vol 102, 296-341)

⁵ BirdLife International species factsheet: www.birdlife.org/datazone/speciesfactsheet.php?id=3265

⁶ Seabird Populations of Britain and Ireland (Mitchell *et al*, 2004)

⁷ JNCC Seabird Monitoring Programme: jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-2890

⁸ The Atlas of Wintering Birds in Britain and Ireland (Lack *et al*, 1986)

⁹ BirdLife International seabird wikispace – seabird.wikispaces.com/Sandwich+Tern

¹⁰ Seabird foraging ranges as a preliminary tool for identifying candidate Marine Protected Areas (Thaxter *et al*, Biological Conservation, 2012)

Further information

Natural England Technical Information Notes are available to download from the Natural England website: www.naturalengland.org.uk. In particular see:

- TIN120: *Establishing Marine Special Protection Areas*

For further information contact the Natural England Enquiry Service on 0300 060 0863 or e-mail enquiries@naturalengland.org.uk.

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