Roseate 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 roseate tern, *Sterna dougallii*, is listed under Annex I of the Birds Directive. They are between 33 and 38 cm long with a wingspan of 72-80 cm[1]. Their typical lifespan is 8 years and the oldest recorded individual was nearly 24 years old[2].

Conservation status

- SPEC3 (unfavourable conservation status in Europe)[3];
- listed in Annex 1 of EU Birds Directive (rare and vulnerable species in Europe); and
- UK red-listed bird of conservation concern[4].

Roseate tern in flight © Chris Gomersall (**rspb-images.com**)

Distribution and population

Roseate terns breed in all but the Arctic and Atlantic Oceans, and they are very sparsely distributed. European birds usually spend the northern winter off the west African coast.

They are the UK's rarest regularly-breeding seabird, and are restricted to a very small number of colonies. By far the largest colony in the UK is at Coquet Island, managed by the RSPB, which regularly holds over 90% of the UK's population. Elsewhere only single pairs breed and then only sporadically.

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UK population

The Seabird 2000 census recorded 56 apparently occupied nests – 0.1% of the global population[5]. In England there were 36 apparently occupied nests in 1998-2002[6]. However, the population has increased since then: a recent maximum of 92 pairs bred in England in 2009, of those 90 were on Coquet Island[7].

Breeding

Roseate terns usually breed on small, low islands, often selecting islands that provide areas of shelter, such as low walls. They also occasionally nest within colonies of other tern species on sandbars, dunes and artificial islands in lagoons. They lay a clutch of 1-2 eggs in a shallow depression in sand or shingle substrate.

Migration/movements

Roseate terns are a long-distance migrant, with European birds spending the northern winter in coastal west African waters, particularly in the Gulf of Guinea, where Ghanaian waters are favoured. They return to UK colonies from May, with young fledging from late July – late August, at which time birds rapidly depart their breeding areas. Inland records in the UK are exceptionally rare[8].

Foraging

Following hovering, roseate terns plunge-dive to seize fish from the top of the water column, often fully submerging. Feeding either alone or in small flocks, they tend to dive from a greater height than common and arctic terns, up to 20 m from sea surface[9].

They specialise in small shoaling fish, particularly sandeels, with a less varied diet than other tern species. They very occasionally feed on small crustaceans.

They tend to forage over sandy substrates, utilising shallow waters and areas of upwelling, including tidal rips and shoals[9].

Their foraging range varies between colonies and with season. They have a smaller foraging range than the larger sandwich tern, with a maximum foraging distance of 30 km recorded. The mean of all the maximum foraging ranges recorded by different studies is 16.6 km[10].

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

[6] JNCC Seabird Monitoring Programme: **jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-2891**

[7] Rare Breeding Birds in the UK 2009 (Holling *et al*, British Birds, Vol 104, 485-537)

[8] Birds in England (Brown and Grice, 2005)

[9] BirdLife International seabird wikispace – **seabird.wikispaces.com/Roseate+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**.