

SPECIES INFORMATION SHEET

Sternula albifrons

English name: Little tern	Scientific name: <i>Sternula albifrons</i>	
Taxonomical group: Class: Aves Order: Charadriiformes Family: Laridae	Species authority: Pallas, 1764	
Subspecies, Variations, Synonyms: –	Generation length: 8 years	
Past and current threats (Habitats Directive article 17 codes): –	Future threats (Habitats Directive article 17 codes): –	
IUCN Criteria: –	HELCOM Red List Category:	LC Least Concern
Global / European IUCN Red List Category LC / LC	Annex I EU Birds Directive=yes Annex II EU Birds Directive=no	
Protection and Red List status in HELCOM countries: <i>Subject of special conservation measures in the EU Member states (Birds Directive, Annex I) and in Russia (Red Data Book of the Russian Federation)</i>		
Denmark: NT, Estonia: NT, Finland: EN, Germany: 1 (Critically endangered), Latvia: –, Lithuania: 2 (V, Vulnerable), Poland: NT, Russia: 2 (declining population), Sweden: VU		

Range description and general trends

The subspecies *Sternula albifrons albifrons* breeds from western Europe to NW Africa and SW Asia. In Europe, it is a scattered breeder along the coasts, but also inland on river banks. The European breeding population is relatively small (35 000– 55 000 breeding pairs). The general European population trend is moderately declining, and the same seems to be true for the Baltic Sea (BirdLife International 2004).

Distribution and status in the Baltic Sea region

The little tern is a breeding bird of all parts of the Baltic. However, the main breeding places are found along the coast of the central and south-western Baltic, whereas the species is scarce in the northern parts. It may also breed on inland river banks. Despite strong fluctuations of the breeding pair numbers in some regions, the general trend seems to be stable both in the long and short term. Local or regional fluctuations are probably rather a result of shifts between breeding sites than a result of changes in the general population size.

In **Sweden**, the little tern breeds mainly along the west coast and east coast up to Gotland. Further north, there are only few breeding pairs at the Bothnian Bay coast (province of Norrbotten). The population size was estimated at 540 bp in 1973 and 460–550 bp between 1989 and 2004. The highest numbers are found on Gotland (c. 250 bp), followed by Scania (75–120 bp), Blekinge (50 bp), Halland (35–70 bp), Öland (40 bp) and Småland (5–10 bp; Tjernberg & Svensson 2007).

Finland hosts only a small population of 55–65 bp, which are mainly breeding in the northern part of the Bothnian Bay. The population has recovered from the moderate low in the 1990s, having now reached the previous top of roughly 60 bp from the 1980s. The gross range has been practically unchanged during the last 30 years.

Sternula albifrons became a breeding bird in **St Petersburg** region of **Russia** during the 1960s. At the beginning it was a very rare species, but during the 1990s it became more numerous in the Neva Bay. The population trend is slightly positive, both in the long and short term run. The population is estimated at 100–200 pairs with noticeable annual fluctuations and redistribution all over the Gulf of

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Finland. The reason of this redistribution is the fact that many breeding habitats exist only temporarily, such as open places on construction sites (e.g., of Ust-Luga or the dam of St. Petersburg, where colonies existed for a certain time). The **Kaliningrad** region of Russia hosts 40–50 bp. The long term trend is slightly positive, but short term trend is negative with noticeable annual fluctuations.

The **Estonian** population is estimated at 400–700 bp. It has been slightly decreasing during the period 1971–1990, but since then it is increasing (Elts et al. 2003, 2009).

Poland hosts by far the largest population of the Baltic Sea area. However, the main breeding habitats are not found at the coast, but in the valleys of unregulated rivers, where it breeds on sparsely vegetated islands and banks, dunes and dry pastures. The largest population is found along the middle Vistula river (700 bp, but recently declining). At the coast, the little tern is a scarce breeder. The main breeding place is the Vistula mouth with up to 47 bp (Sikora et al. 2007).

In Germany, **Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania**, the largest populations are found on the sandy spits of the island Hiddensee. The only other permanent breeding place is the island Langenwerder. Other sites, like the sandy banks at Darß-Zingst Peninsula or the island Kirr are sporadically colonized. The population size is heavily fluctuating. Almost complete numbers are available for the period 1973–2011, the maximum breeding pair numbers being 132 in 1982, the minimum 30 in 2004 (Hälterlein et al. 2000; Herrmann unpubl.).

In **Schleswig-Holstein**, the situation of the little tern is similar to that found in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. From 1984–2009 the population was fluctuating between 78 and 156 bp, without any trend (Hälterlein et al. 2000; Behmann unpubl.).

In **Denmark**, the total population counts about 450–470 bp, of which c. 150 bp are breeding at the Baltic and 300 BP at the North Sea coast (Grell et al. 2004; Nyegaard pers. comm. 2007)

Table 1: Population numbers of the little tern in the Baltic Sea area. For population trends 0=stable, -=decreasing, +=increasing, f=fluctuating, (-)=(probably) slightly decreasing, (+)=slightly increasing, ?=unknown.

Country	Population size		Short-term population trend (10 years)	Long-term population trend (50 years)
	Breeding pairs	Year		
Sweden	460–550	1989–2004	0	0
Finland	55–65	2006–2009	+	?
Estonia	400–700	2003–2008	0	+
Russia PET	100–200	2012	(+) (f)	
Russia KAL	40–50	2011–2012	(-) (f)	+
Latvia	150–200	1990–2000	(-)	?
Lithuania	150–200	1999–2001	(f)	?
Poland	900–1,000	2000–2002	-	0 (?)
Germany SH	107–143	2005–2009	0 (f)	0 (f)
Germany MV	73–105	2006–2011	0 (f)	0 (f)
Denmark	150	2010	0	0
Baltic Sea	2 600–3 150			

Distribution map

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Not included

Habitat and ecology

The main breeding habitats in the Baltic Sea are undisturbed, sandy and gravelly banks and spits along the coast. However, the species also breeds inland on similar habitats along unregulated rivers. The species is highly flexible and may shift to other breeding places if the conditions of a certain site get unfavourable. This “unpredictability” is also a strategy against predation.

Description of major threats

Breeding sites of the little tern are mainly sandy or gravelly banks at the coast or along rivers, i.e. very dynamic habitats. River regulation or coastal defence measures may prevent the dynamics and deteriorate breeding habitats. Clutches are usually laid not much above the water level. Temporary floods quite often destroy eggs or pulli. If such events will occur with more frequency due to climate change, this factor may get an impact. Predation by predatory mammals (foxes, mink, wild boar) is also a common problem (Grell 1998; Hälterlein et al. 2000). Recreational activities may disturb the breeding places, especially along the coast. However, in many countries the breeding sites are mainly located in bird sanctuaries, due to recreation activities at most other suitable sites. Here, little terns are especially vulnerable to predation

Assessment justification

The population is > 2 000 mature individuals and obviously stable. Hence, none of the criteria A–D is met, the species classifies as Least Concern (LC).

Recommendations for actions to conserve the species

Predator control and protection of breeding areas against tourism (especially islands with restricted access).

Common names

Denmark: Dværgterne, Estonia: Väiketiir, Finland: pikkutiira, Germany: Zwergseeschwalbe, Latvia: Mazais zīriņš, Lithuania: Mažoji žuvedra, Poland: Rybitwa białoczelna, Russia: Малая крачка, Sweden: Småtärna

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