

ROSEATE TERN

SPECIES RECOVERY PROGRAMME

ISLES OF SCILLY, 2001



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Acknowledgements

Cover photo: Bryan Thomas

SUMMARY

- This report presents the results of the Roseate Tern Species recovery Programme on Samson, Isles of Scilly.
- The CD player and speakers were reconnected to the solar panel and battery unit on 27th April, the latter having been left in situ over winter.
- A minimum of 25 pairs of Common Terns laid eggs within the site, out of a possible maximum of 36 pairs present in the colony at that time. An unknown number of young were reared to flying.
- No Roseate Terns were identified within the colony with certainty, though a possible calling bird was heard on 11th June. There were also two or more Roseate Tern sightings by other observers in the general area of Samson during June, while the Common Terns were breeding.
- The sole incidence of possible predation, presumably by Carrion Crows, involved a single late tern clutch after the main group had fledged young.
- There was a noticeable reduction this year in the number of Lesser Black-backed Gull nests encroaching into the tern area.
- Little information is available on the timing and success of Common Terns breeding elsewhere in the islands during 200. It is possible a few pairs bred on St Agnes.
- During most visits a check of the whole island was carried out in order to assess Carrion Crow presence, with this species seen on the island on two occasions.

Roseate Tern Species Recovery Programme, Isles of Scilly

1 INTRODUCTION

This report should be read in conjunction with the initial project report for year 2000. The 2000 report details the background to the project and the methods used.

1.1 The Equipment

As in 2000, the equipment was reliable and trouble-free. The solar panel and three twelve-volt batteries were left in place on Samson through the winter whilst the CD-player unit and two speakers were removed.

The system was reconnected on 27th April and immediately commenced working. At 12.1 volts the over-winter battery strength was surprisingly high; owing to the lack of appropriate tools on the day, the three batteries were tested in parallel, rather than individually. The system continued to function without fault for the remainder of the season, i.e. until August.

1.2 Lesser black-backed gulls

It was necessary to remove fewer lesser black-back clutches than in recent years, presumably because gull pairs involved are getting the message. Nests were found from 17th May, when a clutch of two, plus two completed nests were destroyed. On 11th June five clutches were removed, all along the edge of the area of controlled vegetation. It is presumed that three of these involved re-lays by pairs responsible for the previously destroyed nests. All lesser black nests destroyed this year were along the very edge of the tern area, unlike past years, when clutches were found well inside the protected tern area. A great black-backed gull that wandered over the colony on 22nd June was very quickly escorted away by a number of terns.

1.3 Dummy Terns

This year a total of 16 common tern dummies and five Sandwich and one roseate were manufactured and positioned in the same area as 2000. Ideally more should have perhaps been used but production is time consuming and coincided with the demands of house moving. By 17th May at least one dummy had suffered what appeared to be a gull attack; broken bill and scoring along mantle. At least one additional dummy had lost its bill by the end of July.

1.4 Nest Boxes

These have been in position on the top of Samson's north hill for about eight years and several had become very overgrown. Time was spent clearing away heather from around entrance holes and from inside boxes. There are about 15 boxes in place, all of which are in good condition.

1.5 Common terns

The common terns give the impression of having become very focused on this site, to the extent that individuals will commence alarm calling as soon as one lands from a boat onto the main, northern, beach. Few if any terns were in evidence when the equipment was started up on the 27th April or during a visit on 17th May. At this time few were being recorded on Scilly as a whole.

By 11th June there were 24 common tern nests with eggs, with a mean clutch size of 2.79. In addition one nest appeared to have hatched young, though these could not be seen; no evidence of predated egg shells was found. Nests were widely distributed within the site, from near the protective rope fence in the northeast corner, along to the burial chambers on the eastern side and down almost to the CD power unit box (northwest corner). Up to four flush counts (Seabird monitoring handbook) suggested a minimum of 36 pairs of common terns present in the colony at that time.

By 22nd June newly hatched common tern chicks were present in the colony and eleven nests still contained eggs. Flush counts suggested in the region of 30 pairs.

By 10th July very large young terns were present, seriously limiting both the closeness of approach and the amount of time that could be spent near the colony. Very noticeably the colonies 'centre of gravity' had shifted east, past the burial chambers and into the long grass and other low vegetation now emerging in the previously burned area at the top of the eastern slope of north hill. It was also noticeable that the terns reacted as soon as people landed on the main landing beach. About 30 adults were present in or around the colony, c.6 of which were carrying fish; though at least two pairs appeared in the early stages of courtship, e.g. carrying fish. It seems possible the tern chicks moved to take advantage of a suitable amount of cover, the heather of the original site offering little cover to well grown young terns.

On several occasions whilst on Samson terns were observed reacting as if in response to disturbance from within the colony and as a consequence time was spent watching the site from a distance. It appears that whilst the terns at this site are not unduly troubled by people using the footpath along the eastern edge of the burial chambers, they react with regularity to any disturbance within the gull colonies along the lower western edge of the island. These are some distance from the tern site. Mostly this disturbance comes from walkers, though it is not necessarily the case that this disturbance is harmful to the terns.

1.6 Roseate Terns

No roseate terns were recorded inside or around the colony with certainty, though a possible roseate tern call was heard twice very briefly during a visit

on 11th June; no bird was seen. There were at least two independent sightings of roseate tern in the Samson – Green Island area in June.

1.7 Carrion Crows

Five carrion crows elsewhere on Samson on 11th June and two on 20th July were the only recorded sightings, though an apparently predated late tern clutch on 20th July could have been attributable to this species.

1.8 Brown Rats

As always, this and various other sites on Samson were checked for any obvious signs of brown rats, but the island appears to remain rat-free.

1.9 Baler String Barrier

This remains in place and intact. However, the baler string has been in situ for several years and perhaps needs replacing during winter 2001-02, in order to prevent failure during the 2002 breeding season. The small sign that previously directed people east to the main footpath, as they approached up hill from the northern landing beach had disappeared. As a consequence at least one party attempted to go west around the colony, towards the CD box and batteries, and into the Lesser Black-back colony. This problem was resolved when David Mawer replaced the sign.

1.10 Terns elsewhere in Scilly in 2001

Regrettably no structured monitoring of terns took place in Scilly this year, therefore it is not possible to relate these Samson events to the 'wider picture'. It is reported that a very small numbers of, presumably, Common Terns were present on St Agnes, but no further information has been forthcoming.

On 22nd June a small numbers of terns, c8, were observed landing on adjacent Green Island, though it was impossible to say for what purpose. This site was checked more thoroughly on 10th July but there was no evidence of breeding terns being present.

2 DISCUSSION

The 2001 breeding season is considered to have been very successful. The equipment worked without fault with the sound system running continuously for 24 hours a day for over three months. The common terns successfully raised young and obviously managed to defend the site against avian predation. This contrasts with the 2000 breeding season when no young were fledged. Considerably more terns were present this season compared to the last.

Whilst there were no positive sightings of roseate terns on the site, it is encouraging that they were recorded on Scilly in June. Considering the limited time spent on at the colony it is not surprising that there were no records of the species. The first stage of the Recovery Programme is to

establish a stable breeding presence of common terns. After that it is simply a matter of time and patience. Experience from the United States suggests that it may take many years to attract roseate terns back to the area. It will therefore be necessary to continue with the decoys and call-lure for a number of years.

It is disappointing that there was no wider monitoring of tern breeding on Scilly. It is entirely possible that common terns and possibly roseate terns tried to breed elsewhere as has happened in the past. In the absence of these data it is impossible to put the results of the breeding on Samson into context. This knowledge could be crucial to the project, particularly in years when the terns are not successful on Samson. It is strongly recommended that funds are made available to monitor the breeding of terns on other islands in future years.

It is suggested that the path to the summit be moved back down the hill, to the East. This would enable the colony to move to the long grass to the East of the summit, which they appear to prefer. The decoys and sound equipment could also be moved.

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