

# Memories of a species protection warden

**Adrian Brockless was volunteering on an RSPB reserve when he was offered the opportunity of a lifetime – protecting a colony of Little Terns in Northumberland.**

It was 11 April 2010, and I was travelling north from where I lived near Guildford, Surrey, to Newcastle. I was volunteering on Farnham Heath RSPB, Surrey, and had received a phone call from the National Trust's Northumberland Coastal Warden inviting me to an interview. I was thrilled. If successful, I would become part of a team of three wardens charged with looking after a colony of Little Terns that breed on Long Nanny, a low sandy spit just south of the small village of Beadnell.

To say I was excited would be an understatement. In addition to Little Terns, the site also boasts the largest mainland colony of Arctic Terns in Britain and Ireland (between 800 and 1,200 pairs), and up to 10 pairs of Ringed Plover also breed there. In the dunes adjacent to the beach, regular nesters include Meadow Pipit, European Stonechat and Reed Bunting. Insect life is abundant – Dark Green Fritillary butterflies fly among the dunes, while burnet and Cinnabar moths are common. Three species of orchid occur regularly.

## Dream job

The day after the interview, I received a phone call offering me the job. It was the opportunity of a lifetime: to work on my favourite nature reserve with its wonderful and varied wildlife. It was a great moment. I was due to start work on 4 May.

My first day dawned bright and I made my way to the National Trust offices at Newton Point, Northumberland. These were situated in an old RAF lookout station used during the Cold War. Grey, prefabricated and flat roofed, they were rather forbidding. On arrival, I met Kevin Redgrave, who was to be my boss for the next three months, and my two immediate colleagues, Alice and Nicola, who were to live on site with me.

For the first couple of days we were prepped by Kevin, visiting the site by day to erect what seemed like miles and miles of fences. The idea was to set up an effective exclusion zone in which the terns could nest without disturbance from eager beach users. Then the time came for us to move to the site, which would be our home 24 hours a day for the next three months.

We were given a tent each. Our day-time living (including cooking) and working would be conducted in a small hut built in a location in the dunes that gave optimal viewing of the colony. Pitching and securing a tent in loose sand is not easy; long wooden stakes (fashioned by Kevin) were required to ensure they didn't fly away ▶



**Adrian Brockless (left) was one of three wardens charged with protecting the breeding Little Terns.**

STUART ELSOM



Little Tern is Amber listed as a species of conservation concern, making protection schemes like this one all the more necessary to ensure its survival in Britain.



ADRIAN BROCKLESS

These three tents and a hut were home to the wardens for three months.

in the almost ever-present wind.

Water for washing up and drinking was to be brought to the site on average twice a week in four 25-litre tanks, while power was supplied by a large, temporary, solar panel connected to two car batteries. A gas-fired heater, stove and fridge were also provided. To take a shower, one had to walk down the coast to the National Trust base at Newton Point, but the walk back – especially during warmer weather – often negated the beneficial effects of the hose-down! A composting toilet was assembled on-site.

The weather for the first couple of weeks was clement, though there were some bone-chilling night-time frosts in which the temperature fell to  $-3^{\circ}\text{C}$ . We were equipped with thermal sleeping bags and hot-water bottles, but there were still occasions when it was too cold to sleep. During this time, our days were spent monitoring the movements of the terns and acquainting ourselves with the other avifauna of the site.

Early in the season, the terns were still very much drawn to the sea and would only be present at the site during the morning, leaving again by lunchtime. This led to many a disappointed afternoon birdwatcher. After about two weeks, the birds showed more signs of remaining at the colony, and courtship and nest scraping began in earnest.

It would now only be a matter of a few days before the first eggs appeared and 24-hour monitoring of the site would become a necessity. We decided that three eight-hour shifts would be the best way to work

(morning shift 6.30 am-2.30 pm, afternoon shift 2.30 pm to 10.30 pm and night shift 10.30 pm-6.30 am). These shifts were to be rotated between us once a week.

I took the first night shift, more by accident than judgement. An egg had been spotted in the area where the Little Terns nested. Not being familiar with Little Tern eggs, I decided that this probably was one – it turned out to be a Ringed Plover egg! Nevertheless, having started the shift pattern, we decided to continue – it would only be a day or two before Little Tern eggs were laid.

### Challenges ahead

The main part of the season had begun. From now on we were faced with our greatest challenges and the colony with its greatest dangers: predators, high tides, unscrupulous dog walkers and the occasional belligerent person who believed that he was entitled to walk wherever he liked.

The first Arctic Tern egg appeared on 15 May and the first three Little Tern eggs on 23 May. The site now became a potential banquet for a whole host of predators. Most destructive of these were crows. Carrion Crows are highly intelligent birds, yet I was totally unprepared for the cunning they exhibited in their attempts to snatch eggs and chicks. Early in the season, shortly after the birds had laid, crow attacks were almost continuous during daylight hours. On 21 May, eight Arctic Tern eggs were taken. Most days during this period saw at least one or two eggs lost; the crows also had a family to feed nearby.

A number of more or less sensible crowd-detering strategies were employed; initially, the most effective was to run towards them shouting and clapping. Within a week and a half, however, the crows realised that we presented no threat and ignored us. In desperation I made a trip to Seahouses and bought up most of the town's supply of cap-guns and caps. Again, the crows soon became accustomed to the noise and continued their attacks unrestrained.

During the times in which attacks were most intense, each of us on our respective dayshifts resorted to spending large amounts of time on the spit nearest the Little Tern colony – our number one priority. Sun cream and drinking water were essential as the sun could become quite overwhelming. While this tactic provided adequate protection for the Little Terns, it left the southern end of the colony hopelessly at risk, and the crows soon cottoned on. Doubtless, a few Arctic Tern eggs were sacrificed in order to protect the Little Terns.

This period of the season put the wardens under great strain. Signs were erected to try to deter dog walkers from entering the site. A stray person or loose dog had to be escorted away from the colony, at risk of considerable disturbance; time spent on this provided opportunities for the crows which, on several occasions, they took. Most dog walkers co-operated. Some genuinely had not read the signs; others pretended not to have seen them (we could spot them through the telescope, reading the signs then continuing in spite of them).



TONY COOMES

As well as the Little Terns, Long Nanny holds the largest mainland colony of Arctic Terns in Britain and Ireland, with up to 1,200 pairs present. Success is mixed, however.

Sometimes the heat of the day was stifling.

By mid-May, we had had our first ominous visit from a Weasel. Their presence was mostly revealed by a tightly knit dome of hovering terns above the area where the Weasel was plundering nests in the Marram Grass. Occasionally, the same reaction was triggered by a (harmless) Rabbit. We were reluctant to enter the colony at such times for fear of treading on eggs and causing excessive stress to the terns.

### Judgement call

Throughout the season, judgement was constantly required. It was a case of cost versus benefit: would entering the colony be more harmful than leaving whatever predator was in there? If there was a breeze, would causing the birds to 'dread' (that is, fly away *en masse*) allow sand to blow over eggs? Would the eggs chill? These and many other factors came into play each time an excursion into the colony became a possibility. There were no definite answers; each case was different and required a response appropriate to it from the warden on duty.

Nights were no easier. Foxes and the Barn Owl were a constant threat. The owl was responsible for the decapitation of an adult Arctic Tern early in the season and, later on, for the demise of a chick. An Otter invaded the colony and attacked an adult Arctic Tern on one of Alice's night shifts, damaging its wing. In the morning I carried the boxed-up injured bird to Low Newton to hand it over to an RSPCA

officer. I doubt if the bird survived.

Monitoring work and essential site maintenance was required throughout the season. Numbers of Arctic Terns at the site were monitored daily from 6 May. Active Little Tern scrapes had numbers assigned to them. A daily log was taken in which the number of pairs of Arctic and Little Terns, as well as Ringed Plover, were monitored. In another daily log we recorded sightings of all the other flora and fauna on the reserve.

Once chicks started hatching, regular observations of feeding behaviour were made. Luckily, the terns here did not seem to experience the food shortages that were blighting many of the colonies in the Northern Isles. Indeed, sand-eel size was excellent and feeding trips were frequent; on more than one occasion, chicks were seen refusing food.

Combined with the ever-present threats from predators and human disturbance, this represented a potentially exhausting workload for us. Sleep deprivation was not infrequent. If the nights were particularly cold, sleep was often difficult. Later in the season, when the days became hot, the warden on night shift would bake in their tent while trying to snatch sleep during the day. If it was windy, the noise of the flapping tent made anything but superficial sleep impossible. There were also times when the warden on nights needed back-up from the other two; the night warden would ring our mobiles and we'd jump out of bed and make our way to wherever they were. Part of the sleep problem was solved

by walking down to the point and sleeping in the offices – in one of the rooms there was a pull-out sofa bed. We could go there, have a shower and grab a few hours of proper sleep.

### Voluntary help

So much of this work could not have been carried out successfully without the help of a small but vital and dedicated group of volunteers, each of whom has my heartfelt gratitude. A volunteers' timetable was established which meant that we could plan our work around the extra help. If a warden was away from the site for a day or two, the remaining two wardens worked two 12-hour shifts backed up by a volunteer.

Our volunteers were very kind and generous. We would almost always receive goodies – chocolate chip or blueberry muffins and flapjack was one volunteer's speciality; another brought homemade rhubarb crumble! All of them gave us fresh milk and bread.

When something happened on site, having a volunteer present meant being able to deal with the problem without worrying about the other end of the site; it also meant being able to grab five or 10 minutes for lunch. Not only that, but if we needed extra cover at short notice, most were willing to oblige if they could. Volunteers are central to so many conservation projects; sometimes, I think they don't appreciate their own worth.

Talking to visitors about the site and its wildlife was also an integral part of day-to-day life and I always enjoyed expressing



**Little Tern is a ground-nesting species, so is particularly vulnerable to predators and the tides.**

my enthusiasm and passion for wildlife. I met some very interesting people and heard some wonderful stories. One thing that was very noticeable was the multiplicity of characters that visited the site to enjoy the tern spectacle. They showed me that there are innumerable different ways to enjoy wildlife. Some were fascinated by the intricacies of the terns' life stories; others were family groups or photographers. Many visited to be filled with a sense of wonder. It was an honour to talk to all of these people. Regular visitors would sometimes bring goodies – occasionally alcoholic – which were most welcome.

### Time and tide

Throughout, there was the bi-weekly threat of spring tides. At full moon and new moon all of us were particularly jittery. The spit on which the terns nest is only just above the mean high tide mark and tides above average height represented a very potent threat. For the most part, during the highest of the tides, the weather remained calm. However, it was the sea that was the cause of my unhappiest moments as warden.

During the middle of June, atmospheric pressure had remained fairly low and a strong breeze continued to blow from the north or north-east. Although this occurred during a period of neap tides, the persistence of the wind and low pressure meant the sea had developed a substantial swell.

Just after high tide on the evening of 19 June, the worst happened. It was about 9.30 pm and I was organising myself for the night shift – preparing a hot-water bottle and a thermos of hot coffee, donning my thermals and head torch, checking the lamps, having 'breakfast' and so on. Alice and Nicola were also in the hut. The sea was big but the neap tide was on its way out.

I returned to my tent to finish putting

on my 'night' clothes, then made my way back to the hut to find it empty. I put the kettle on the stove for my hot-water bottle, then went outside around to the viewing platform on the opposite side of the hut. It was at that point that I saw that some of spit had been swamped. Nicola and Alice were already on their way back.

Apparently, three huge waves had inundated most of the Little Tern colony and it looked like we had lost nine chicks and 62 eggs from the 31 scrapes. Not all would have been expected to survive in any event, but we had thought, up to that point, that we were on course to beat the 0.71 (chicks fledged per per) productivity figure of the previous year. We were devastated.

That night, I did my night shift as normal, though I felt miserable and dejected. At around 2 am, I decided to enter the colony to see the damage for myself. I made my way through a number of sleeping adult birds, checking the scrapes we had raised up on old fish crates. To my delight my torch beam shone on two small Little Tern chicks nestling in the corner of one of the sand-filled crates. By 24 June we had seven chicks all doing well and several adults had re-laid. It was now imperative that no further Little Tern chicks or eggs were lost.

During late June and early July, the weather remained capricious. Chicks were beginning to fledge by the day. The site was now bursting with life: Bloody Cranesbill adorned the dunes, lending them a purple hue, and Dark Green Fritillaries graced the reserve with their direct flight. No less beautiful were Small Heath butterflies and the day-flying burnet and Cinnabar moths. A female Marsh Harrier put in regular appearances, inducing temporary panic among the terns, but other than that, causing no harm. More spectacular was the Peregrine which snatched an Arctic Tern from the beach in front of several

astonished visitors.

The most wonderful times for me during this period were towards the end of my night shifts at around 4.15 am, when the main nocturnal threats had receded and the diurnal Carrion Crow and Weasel attacks had yet to get going. This small but serene window allowed me to stand on the viewing platform by the hut and drink in the wonder of the natural world, reflecting on my luck at having been handed such a great opportunity.

By the middle of July, the season was drawing to a close. Many chicks had taken their first faltering flights and tern numbers were dwindling. During the late afternoon and early evening, small groups of departing Arctic Terns would spiral upwards over the reserve, sometimes heading into the clouds – a prelude to their long journey southwards to their wintering grounds in South Africa and the Antarctic. The last two Little Tern chicks fledged on 26 July and on 29th we began packing up the site. For the next week we would, once again, be based at the National Trust offices at Newton Point writing the season's report.

Of the 21 pairs of Little Terns that survived the flood, 11 young fledged – a productivity figure of 0.52. Although not as good as the previous year, the figure was still well above the national average. Arctic Terns fared less well, largely due to pressure from predators; approximately 900 pairs fledged 270 young – a productivity figure of 0.30.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to Kevin Redgrave for being such a wonderfully supportive boss. I learnt so much from him. ■

Find your ideal job in birding on the Birdwatch jobs pages at [www.birdwatch.co.uk/open/?page=careers-in-birding-home](http://www.birdwatch.co.uk/open/?page=careers-in-birding-home).