

# Terns on the Firth of Forth



Port Edgar welcomes some well-travelled seabird visitors during the spring and summer. Terns are small, graceful seabirds that come to nest in Scotland in early May. Nicknamed “sea swallows”, they are easy to distinguish with their agile, buoyant flight and forked tail.

## The rare roseate tern

Seabirds are one of the fastest declining groups of birds in the world, and **many Scottish seabird populations have plummeted by up to 50%** since the 1980s. One seabird that has been significantly affected is the roseate tern, which nearly became extinct in the 19th century because their plumage was prized to decorate ladies hats. Although legal protection initially saved them, the population crashed again in the late 1900s, making it the UK’s rarest breeding seabird.

The Forth islands were the core Scottish breeding area, but very few roseates now join the Forth’s nesting common terns. **The last pair bred here in 2009.**

Conservation efforts to help this rare seabird have been boosted by an EU-funded partnership project. The Roseate Tern LIFE Recovery Project aims to **safeguard the remaining three colonies** in the UK and Ireland while providing suitable conditions for expansion to sites within their former range.



## Turning the tide

As ground-nesting birds, terns lay their eggs on bare rock or in small depressions which makes them highly vulnerable to human disturbance, flooding and predators.

Since the early 1990s, Port Edgar has supported a small common tern population on an artificial, floating island. However, during the winter storms of 2014–15, the pontoon was damaged forcing terns to search for a new place to raise their chicks.

The replacement raft commissioned by the LIFE Project was built in 2018. This 64m<sup>2</sup> platform was specially designed with common and roseate terns in mind, to create new nesting habitat that would again keep them safe from most threats.

To encourage nesting, the surface was covered with fine crushed shells and shelters to protect chicks from predators and the elements. Decoy models of common terns were added which successfully attracted the first breeding pairs only a few weeks after installation.

## Fly me to the moon

In autumn, most terns in the Firth of Forth migrate towards the coast of west Africa to find milder weather and feeding grounds. However, the intrepid Arctic terns travel all the way to the Antarctic coast and back.

During their long life of up to 30 years, **Arctic terns can fly the same distance as to the moon and back three times over** – quite a feat!

## Food for thought

Terns feed mainly by hovering in the air and then dropping quickly to catch food from near the surface of open water. Most tern species have relatively short foraging ranges and the majority of their diet is made up of small fish like sandeels and sprat. These specialisms make terns more vulnerable to extreme weather conditions and local food shortages compared to species with greater foraging ranges and the ability to dive deeper. In addition, climate change is causing the sea temperature to rise, disturbing the delicate marine ecosystem and negatively impacting the availability of sandeels for terns, as well as other wildlife such as seals and dolphins.



## Tern ID guide



### Little tern

- Smallest of the five terns that nest in Scotland
- Has distinctive yellow legs and yellow bill with a black tip
- White forehead



### Roseate tern

- Has a completely black bill in May which slowly becomes red at the base until it is half red by August
- Medium-sized with very pale grey appearance compared to other terns
- Longest tail streamers out of all the terns



### Sandwich tern

- Largest of the five nesting UK terns
- Black legs and black bill with yellow tip
- Only UK nesting tern to have a shaggy crest



### Arctic tern

- Tail streamers extend past the wing when standing (middle length between roseate and common)
- Medium-sized bird with very short red legs
- Red bill



### Common tern

- Tail streamers are shorter than Arctic terns (don’t extend past the wing when standing)
- Medium-sized bird with orange/red bill with a black tip
- Orange/red legs

Helping to give nature a home



The Roseate Tern LIFE Recovery Project (LIFE14NAT/UK/000394) is supported by the LIFE financial instrument of the European Union, in partnership with the RSPB, BirdWatch Ireland and the North Wales Wildlife Trust.  
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