

Northumberland Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Beadnell Bay (Long Nanny) breeding shorebirds – 2020 summary and plan for 2021

a report for Beadnell Parish Council

1. Introduction

As requested by the Chair of Beadnell Parish Council this report:

- Provides a summary of the breeding season for the three main shorebird species that breed at the National Trust's Long Nanny site in Beadnell Bay.
- Reviews the arrangements for public access at Beadnell Bay during the 2020 shorebird breeding season.
- Provides a draft plan for managing public access in 2021.

The area at the mouth of the Long Nanny Burn in the middle of Beadnell Bay has been protected as a place for breeding shorebirds since 1977 when the National Trust began an annual scheme to safeguard the rare Little Tern colony on the foreshore. Protection from human disturbance has been key to breeding success for Little Tern and Ringed Plovers and since 1980 for Arctic Tern when this species took advantage of the protection and reduced disturbance afforded to the Little Terns.

Beadnell Bay is specifically designated for its assemblage of breeding shorebirds and the birds themselves are fully protected.

The **Northumbria Coast Special Protection Area** was classified in 2000, qualifying under Article 4.1 of the EC Birds Directive because it supported 1.7% of the GB population of breeding little tern listed in Annex I of the Directive and under Article 4.2 of the Directive because it supported two regularly occurring migratory species: 2.6% of the biogeographic population of turnstone and 1.6% biogeographic population of purple sandpiper. In summer, the site supports an internationally important population of breeding Little Tern *Sterna albifrons* and Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*.

The site is also part of the **Northumberland Shore Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)** (Little Terns, Arctic Terns and Ringed Plover are included in the citation for the SSSI) and the **Northumbria Coast Ramsar Site, with North Northumberland Dunes Special Area of Conservation and Newton Links SSSI adjoining**.

All wild birds, their nests and eggs are protected by law during the breeding season under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, it is an offence to:

- intentionally kill, injure or take any wild bird.
- Intentionally take, damage or destroy the nest of any wild bird while it is in use or being built.
- Intentionally take or destroy the egg of any wild bird.

Little Terns are further protected under **Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act** for which it is an offence to intentionally or recklessly disturb birds and their young at, on or near an 'active' nest.

Penalties that can be imposed for criminal offences in respect of a single bird, nest or egg contrary to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 is an unlimited fine, up to six months imprisonment or both.

Between 1985 and 2000 there has been a long-term decline in the UK, with little tern numbers down by 38%. More recently between 2000 and 2015 the trend is -18%. Because Little Terns prefer to nest on the beach, disturbance from recreational visitors to the coast is a major factor in this decline and without protection schemes like the one in place in Beadnell Bay, the species would fail to breed at most UK sites.

2. Shorebird breeding summary 2020

2020 proved to be a challenging season – COVID-19 restrictions, a shortage of staff and no volunteers impacting on site management and ultimately breeding success. A skeleton-team of staff worked throughout the summer to man the site at key times. A summary of the breeding success can be found in the table below.

Summary of breeding success at the Long Nanny in 2020

	Arctic Tern	Little Tern	Ringed Plover
Number of breeding pairs	400-450*	38	9
Number of chicks successfully fledged	0	6	6

* On 24th June, 147 pairs were recorded on the spit, although rangers reported that approximately 50% of arctic tern nests in this area were lost to flooding prior to this count. The number of terns nesting along the beach were not recorded, but casual observations indicate that this number was much lower than usual. The maximum number of pairs recorded in the “tern garden” was 57 on 24th May. Combining these numbers with a conservative estimate of 50-100 pairs nesting on the beach, we get an overall figure of 400-450 pairs of Arctic tern nesting at the Long Nanny this season.

Arctic Terns were the worst affected species, with no chicks fledging the site. It is the first time since they became established at this site that Arctic Terns have failed to fledge any chicks, although there have been years where very few chicks have fledged (for example 2016 saw only 2 Arctic tern chicks fledge^[1]).

Little Terns fledged six chicks this season. While this figure is well short of the 54 chicks which fledged in 2019^[2], it does represent a minor success given the circumstances. The number of fledglings can fluctuate hugely from year to year and since 1980 there have been 16 seasons where fewer than six chicks have fledged^[3]. Therefore, 2020 should not be viewed as a disaster in this regard.

There were a variety of factors which affected the breeding success at the Long Nanny this season. The main ones are outlined below:

Staffing

COVID-19 meant that dedicated seasonal rangers were not recruited this year. The existing ranger team was also depleted, with some staff being placed on furlough leave. A skeleton staff manned the site throughout the summer, but logistically it was not possible for rangers to be on site 24 hours a day, as would happen in a normal year. Instead, rangers were on site for 8 hours a day for the majority of May and June, and then 16 hours a day throughout July and early August. One night shift

was conducted on the night of 26th June, however, it was not possible to conduct regular night shifts this season. A stop was also put on volunteering which meant that we lost out on the many hours and valuable experience that volunteers contribute every year.

Predators

Predators observed on site this season included Stoat, Weasel, Rat, Kestrel, Peregrine, Carrion Crow and numerous species of gull. It is believed that ground predators, especially Stoat and Rat, contributed significantly to the failure of Arctic terns in particular. Predators may well have had a more significant impact on the colony this year in the absence of rangers, especially at night when activity is often heightened. Many predated and stashed eggs were discovered throughout the season. Because of COVID-19 restrictions only limited predator control was possible and this was done when the breeding season was in full-swing and was too late to be effective

Recreational visitors

The beach was very busy with recreational visitors at times this season, particularly when COVID-19 lockdown restrictions were eased in late-May, which resulted in higher volumes of visitors than usual.

Many visitors were not aware of the restrictions in place and consequently rangers had to deal with frequent incidents of people (and often loose dogs) straying into the roped off area. In June, rangers discovered human footprints which led directly through the tern colony on the sand spit, as well as numerous sets of dog footprints in the same area. There were more incursions than usual into the site from loose dogs while the rangers were present. We know that incursions from dogs and people into the site occurred when rangers were absent from the site, but do not know the frequency of these events. Such incursions will have undoubtedly unsettled any nesting birds.

The behaviour of these birds is such that a disturbance event will frequently cause all birds to take to the skies, risking egg chill or predation.

Tides

As always, spring high tides influenced the breeding success of all species. High tides in early June washed out all 38 little tern nests, as well as a significant number (est. 50%) of Arctic tern nests on the beach and sand spit. Washed out ringed plover eggs were also found along the strandline.

Disease

Last season, a disease (suspected avian botulism) killed 921 adult Arctic terns which represented 31% of the colony^[4]. It was almost inevitable that we would see a knock-on effect from this and, as expected, far fewer birds returned to the site to breed this season. It is hoped that, over the coming years, we will see the number of pairs increase again to something like the pre 2020 level.

3. Access arrangements in 2020

Access along the foreshore has been restricted to protect shorebirds during their breeding season since the National Trust started managing the site in 1977 to protect the rare Little Tern colony. Access restrictions were extended when the site was colonised by Arctic Terns in 1980.

Purchase of the Tughall Mill Farm in 2017 by the National Trust gave them ownership of the foreshore north of the Long Nanny Burn and, for the first time to protect that area for breeding

shorebirds. Protection has been in place on the North Side of the Burn each breeding season since the land was purchased. The benefits of protecting this larger area include:

- Providing protection for Ringed Plovers in some of their favoured nesting locations.
- Increasing the area of suitable, safe foreshore Little Terns.
- Adding a significant 'buffer' around the Little Tern Colony to afford them greater protection particularly from dogs off-lead.
- Providing a safe nesting place in the likely event of the burn changing course.

When protection is in place, access north-south along Beadnell Bay is restricted at high tide, and this has always been the case. Before National Trust took possession of the foreshore at Tughall and increased the size of the protection area, visitors could use an alternative permissive route along the north side of the burn via the footbridge. In recent years the mouth of the burn has changed direction, taking a much more northerly route to the sea, cutting into the face of the eroding dune and at times, this has physically prevented access along the north side of the burn to the footbridge.

During the 2018 and 2019 breeding season, National Trust created an alternative route through a low-point in the dunes known as 'Miller's Nick' and although not ideal, this alternative worked for the majority of visitors in providing a route from the beach to the footbridge.

In 2020, due to erosion of the dune face, the alternative route through Miller's Nick wasn't available, meaning that at high-tide there was no access north-south along Beadnell Bay other than on the Northumberland Coast Path - a well-marked and maintained route to the footbridge behind the dune-ridge. At low tide, it is possible to walk the full length of Beadnell Bay along the beach, although this involves a short, ankle-deep paddle across the burn. There is access into the dunes south of the burn via a signposted permissive route which connects the beach with the Northumberland Coast Path

With limited staff resources, lockdown restrictions and no access to procurement, providing good access advice to visitors walking south along Beadnell Bay wasn't possible until they had reached the point at which access was restricted. Faced with the choice of retracing their steps and returning to the car park, or using the first available 'cut' in the dunes to pick up the Coast Path many, understandably, chose the latter, taking them through the caravan site as they found a route through to the Coast path. This gave rise to tensions with the owners of the caravan park.

Signage to advise southbound visitors about the access restrictions ahead was put in place as soon as possible. This signage was reactive and under normal circumstances would have been much better. Signage was also put in place by the caravan park owners and the combination of both efforts led to mixed messaging and a feeling of signage overkill.

The collective response from National Trust and the AONB Partnership staff was largely reactive and in response to views of local people, the caravan park owners and Beadnell Parish Council and lessons have been learned and these will be factored into plans for 2021.

4. Managing access in 2021

AONB Partnership staff and National Trust will have a plan in place to better-manage access restrictions in Beadnell Bay in 2021 and this section of the report outlines what measures will be put in place. The final plan cannot be agreed until Spring 2021, this is because:

- Winter storms will change the beach levels, the direction of the burn and the rate of erosion of the dunes.

- The COVID-19 pandemic may mean that restrictions are in place that could prevent some actions.
- Resources available to National Trust are unknown at this time.

Our plan at this point-in-time outlines what we hope to have in place for the 2021 breeding season. This will be reviewed in late March when we should have some clarity on the factors set out above.

Access Restrictions

There is no way of knowing exactly to what degree disease, climate change, predators and people played a role in the low numbers of fledglings this year, but it is clear we need to manage any of the factors we are able to, to ensure success in 2021. In 2018 we had the highest ever number of Arctic Tern pairs nesting at the site by a significant margin^[5], and in 2019 we had the highest ever Little Tern productivity at the site^[2] – this indicates that closure of the north side of the burn can have a positive impact on the site. Excluding people from the north side of the burn also extends the area available to Ringed Plovers.

As in the previous three breeding seasons, **access will be restricted on the north side of the burn** to afford greater protection to nesting shorebirds and ensure that members of the public can't inadvertently commit an offence under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. **The importance of protecting these birds from disturbance (accidental or otherwise) by recreational visitors cannot be understated.**

This will mean that at high tide, there will be no access along Beadnell Bay, on-foot, other than on the Northumberland Coast Path via the footbridge or at the south side of the burn along the permissive route.

It is vitally important therefore that recreational visitors are informed of these restrictions at the earliest opportunity, ideally before they arrive in Beadnell and certainly before they set off along the beach. This applies mostly to people wanting to walk south from Beadnell towards Newton-by-the-Sea as there is an alternative route through the dunes for north-bound walkers as previously mentioned. Visitors will be aware that there is no access from the beach to the Coast Path through the caravan park and that the only right of access in the caravan park is on the Northumberland Coast Path.

How will we do this?

Pre-arrival information

- Clear maps showing the access restrictions and alternative routes will be produced. These will be available on the AONB website as downloadable pdfs.
- Social media will be used to inform visitors of the access restrictions and will point them to the AONB website for further information.
- A press release will be issued to inform local people and visitors about the restrictions and why they are in place.
- Tourism businesses will be encouraged be aware of the restrictions and pass on this information to their customers.

Signage

- The current signage in Beadnell Bay Car Park will be replaced with better quality signage.
- Seasonal signage in the car park will alert visitors to the restrictions.

- Seasonal posters in the display case and in the toilets will inform visitors of the restrictions.
- Seasonal signage will be in place at other access points.
- Signage will be concise, alerting visitors to the restrictions. Signage in the car park will provide more information about why the restrictions are needed.
- Signage will be provided at the northern boundary of the restricted area which will give clear instructions on how to continue their journey.

Personnel

- National Trust (subject to COVID and budget restrictions) will endeavour to have personnel at the northern boundary of their site either side of high tide during the day.
- Coast Care (Subject to COVID restrictions) will ask for volunteers to provide advice to visitors in Beadnell Car Park when high tide falls in the middle of the day.

Authors

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- References

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[2] Henson, T *et al*, Shorebirds at the Long Nanny (2019), *Northumbrian Naturalist* **88**, 24-32.

[3] MASTER SPREADSHEET, Long Nanny Shorebirds 1980 – 2020.

[4] Hodgson, M *et al*, ARCTIC TERNS *STERNA PARADISAEA* AND SUSPECTED AVIAN BOTULISM IN NORTHUMBERLAND (2019), *Northumbrian Naturalist* **88**, 33-37.

[5] Brosnan, V *et al*, BREEDING TERNS AND RINGED PLOVERS AT THE LONG NANNY (2018), *Northumbrian Naturalist* **86**, 17-25