



Blakeney Point Breeding Bird Report 2023



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Introduction

Location and context

Blakeney Point is a four-mile shingle spit backed by saltmarsh with an expanse of sand dunes at the western end. During summer the Point hosts nationally and internationally important Tern colonies and in winter is home to England's largest Grey Seal rookery. The spit encloses Blakeney Harbour, and forms part of the 1097 hectare Blakeney National Nature Reserve which comprises Blakeney Point, Blakeney Freshes, Chapel Island, Stiffkey Meals and Morston Marshes.

Morston Marshes, an expanse of saltmarsh, lie to the south of Blakeney Point. To the west are Stiffkey Meals, a ridge of sand on the northern edge of the saltmarsh. And to the east are Blakeney Freshes, an area of freshwater grazing marsh enclosed by a sea wall, containing reedbed, ponds and ditches. The Freshes was previously saltmarsh prior to being reclaimed in the early eighteenth century. Chapel Island, previously part of Blakeney Freshes, was created in 2005 when the River Glaven was re-routed to alleviate flooding upstream.

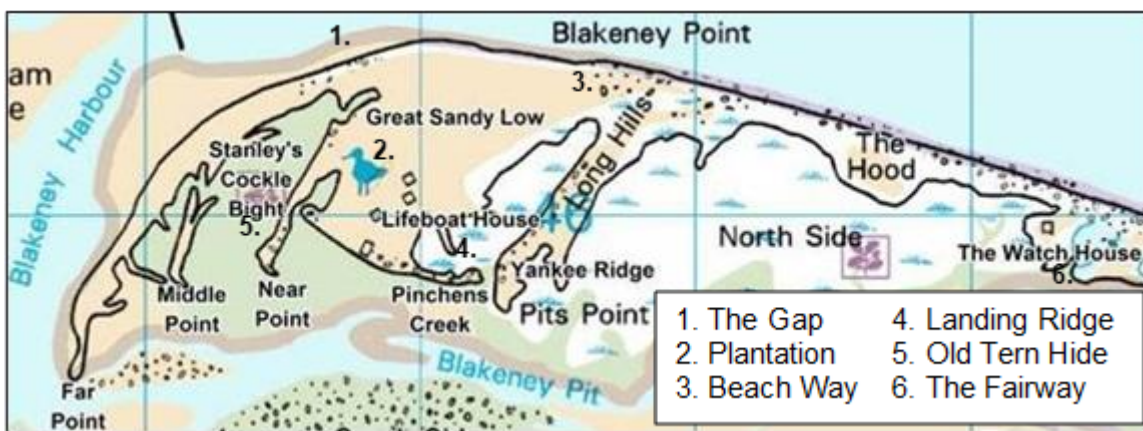


Figure 1. Blakeney Point local names

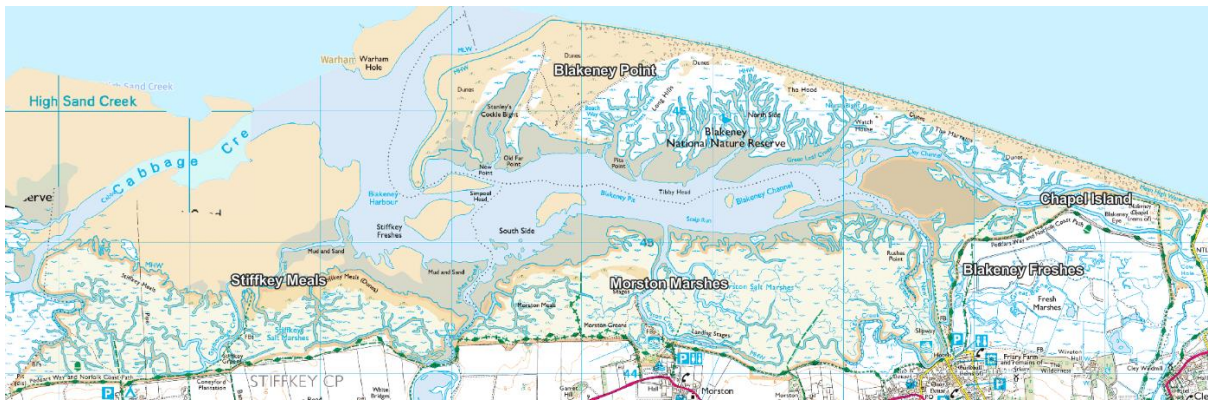


Figure 2. Map of Blakeney NNR

Methods

All species that breed on Blakeney Point are surveyed annually as part of regular Breeding Bird Surveys and specific targeted surveys. All survey work for Schedule 1 species is done under licence.

For passerines and Redshank, early morning counts of singing birds or territorial behaviour were undertaken from March to June. For Gulls, Terns, Oystercatchers, Avocets, and Ringed Plovers, nest counts were undertaken.

Summary

This year was another disappointing year for Sandwich and Common Terns, although marginally better than last. Numbers of both species were low – a maximum of 40 pairs of Sandwich Terns and 39 pairs of Common Tern. Rats continue to be an issue and neither species fledged any chicks.

In contrast, Little Terns had a successful year. Numbers increased to 96 pairs from 50 last year, and a minimum of 49 chicks fledged from the colony west of Gap.

Once again, Avocets nested at the eastern end of the shingle ridge and seven pairs nested. Ringed Plover had a successful year, fledging 21 chicks from 17 pairs. This is, however, a much lower success rate than that required to maintain the population. Oystercatchers increased slightly although with limited success for the third year running.

After first nesting in 2020, Stonechat numbers plateaued this year. Five pairs nested and they remain a welcome addition to the breeding bird population of the Point.

Table 1. Breeding bird data for 2022 and 2023 including 5 year mean (2018-2022)

Species	2022	2023	5 year mean
Shelduck	61	56	46
Shoveler	2	1	0
Gadwall	6	5	5
Mallard	8	9	6
Grey Partridge	2	0	6
Pheasant	5	5	4
Red-legged Partridge	1	1	0
Stock Dove	1	1	1
Woodpigeon	0	1	1
Oystercatcher	70	89	71
Avocet	15	7	12
Ringed Plover	14	17	12
Redshank	19	24	17
Black-headed Gull	138	52	341
Mediterranean Gull	0	0	1
Common Gull	0	7	2
Herring Gull	39	13	45
Lesser Black-backed Gull	11	4	8
Sandwich Tern	1	40 (max)	1303
Little Tern	50	96	118
Common Tern	10	39	169
Arctic Tern	0	0	3
Skylark	41	47	35
Sedge Warbler	1	1	0
Wren	9	9	10
Starling	1	0	0
Stonechat	6	5	4
Dunnock	8	6	6
Pied Wagtail	1	1	1
Meadow Pipit	58	56	51
Linnet	30	25	27
Reed Bunting	20	20	18

Systematic list

Where productivity figures are quoted the 5 year mean is given in brackets.

Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

Amber list

Shelduck numbers dropped slightly this year, from 61 pairs last year to 56 this year. Numerous broods were seen in the harbour during the summer, including two creches of 19 and 12 on the 7th of July and a creche of 29 on the 4th of August, but true fledging numbers are unknown.

Shoveler *Spatula clypeata*

Amber list

Breeding bird surveys recorded a single pair in the vicinity of Chapel Island. No young were seen.

Gadwall *Mareca strepera*

Amber list

Five pairs were recorded on Blakeney Point. Only two nests were found, one on Yankee Ridge which was later predated by a Marsh Harrier. No young were seen.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Amber list

Nine pairs were recorded. No young were seen.

Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix*

Red list

No breeding was recorded this year, bringing to an end 14 years of reliable breeding on the point.

Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*

Not Assessed

A minimum of five pairs were recorded. Two along the shingle ridge and three in the dunes. Two broods were seen in May.

Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa*

Not Assessed

Once again, one pair were present in the dunes throughout the summer.

Stock Dove *Columba oenas*

Amber list

Once again, one pair nested in the box on the lifeboat house but the attempt failed.

Woodpigeon *Columba palumbus*

Amber list

One pair, unsuccessfully, attempted to nest in the silver birch in the Lifeboat house garden.

Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

Amber list

Eighty-nine pairs nested – sixty-five around the headland and twenty-four between the Long Hills and Cley. Productivity was assessed at 0.5 from a representative sample of nests. Pairs on the Landing Ridge were heavily predated by rats.

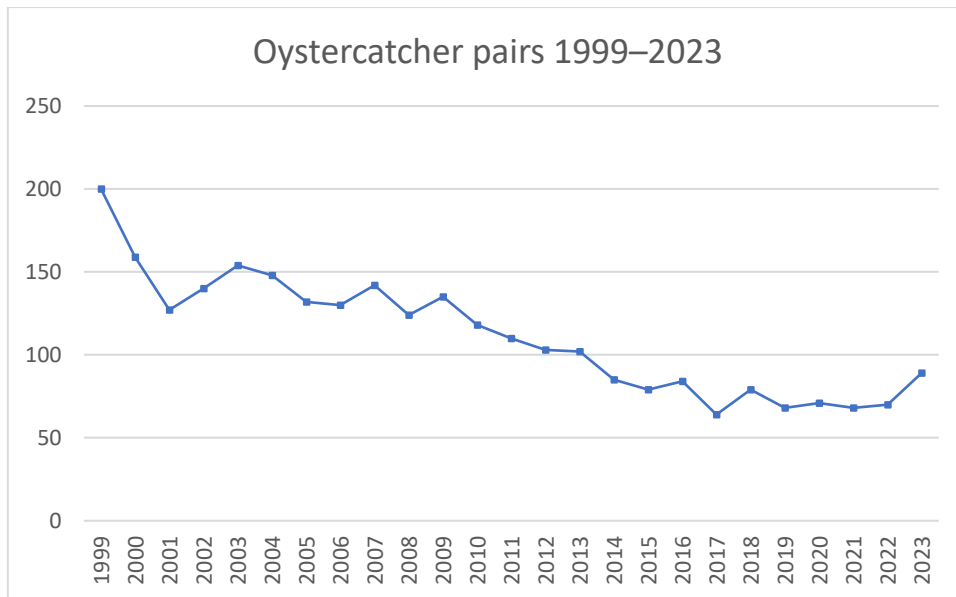


Figure 3. Oystercatcher pairs 1999-2023

Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*

Amber list

Schedule 1

Seven pairs nested this year, a dramatic decrease from last year's 15. As usual, all were on the shingle between the fishing boats and the wreck of the silver dawn. Disturbance was, as always, an issue and the fate of the few broods seen is unknown.

Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

Red list

Seventeen pairs nested and fledged 21 chicks. Cages were deployed on most nests and contributed to good hatching success. Once chicks hatched fledging success was good. Although this was another successful, numbers are still well short of the productivity required to maintain the population.

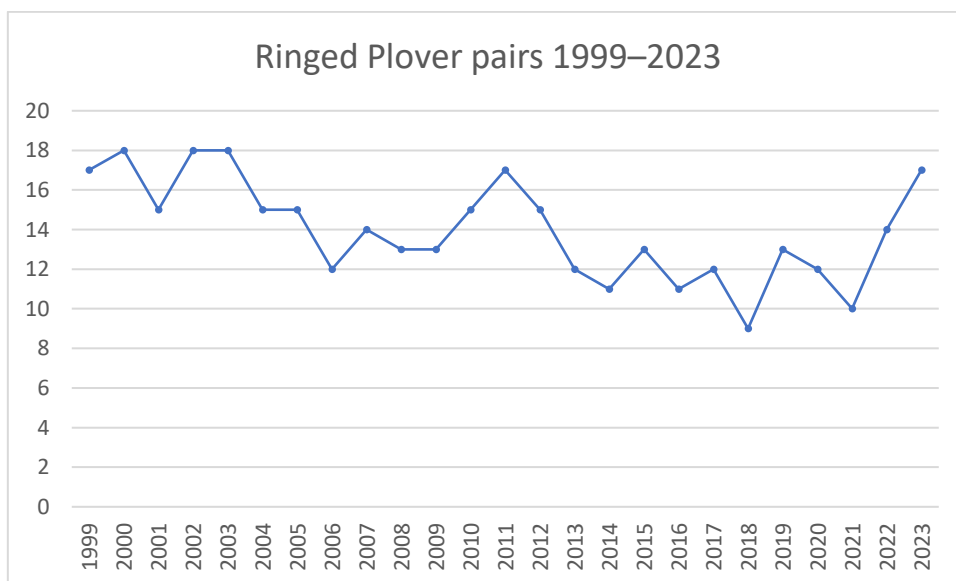


Figure 4. Ringed Plover pairs 1999-2023

Redshank *Tringa totanus*

Amber list

Surveys recorded 24 pairs of Redshank across the point. Productivity was not assessed but thought to be average.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

Amber list

A small number of Black-headed Gulls attempted to nest on far Point during April but were unsuccessful due, at least in part, to large gull predation. By the end of May a small colony formed west of Gap. Numbers peaked at 42 pairs with a further 10 on Middle Point. All nests failed at egg stage, with gull and rat predation being noted.

Mediterranean Gull *Ichthyaetus melanocephalus*

Amber list

Schedule 1

Individual birds were recorded throughout summer but there was, once again, no evidence of breeding this year.

Common Gull *Larus canus*

Amber list

Seven pairs nested on the shingle west of Gap.

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*

Red list

Thirteen pairs nested. No young fledged.

Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*

Amber list

Four pairs nested. No young fledged.

Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis*

Amber list

Another disappointing year for Sandwich Tern although a marginal improvement on 2022. The first birds were recorded over Far Point on the 6th of April. Evening roost numbers were depleted through April, with high counts only reaching 500 compared to 2000 in recent years. No birds from this first arrival attempted to nest. At the beginning of June there was another arrival of around 300 birds that prospected the beach west of Gap. A maximum of 40 pairs formed a small colony but all failed at egg stage.

Owing to the lack of a large breeding population there were, again, no mass mortalities from avian influenza. Small numbers of dead birds were found through the summer, all of which were presumed to have been affected by avian influenza but no testing was carried out. Numbers seem to indicate a reduction in adult mortality with carcasses found this year representing only 3% of the point population compared to 15% last year.

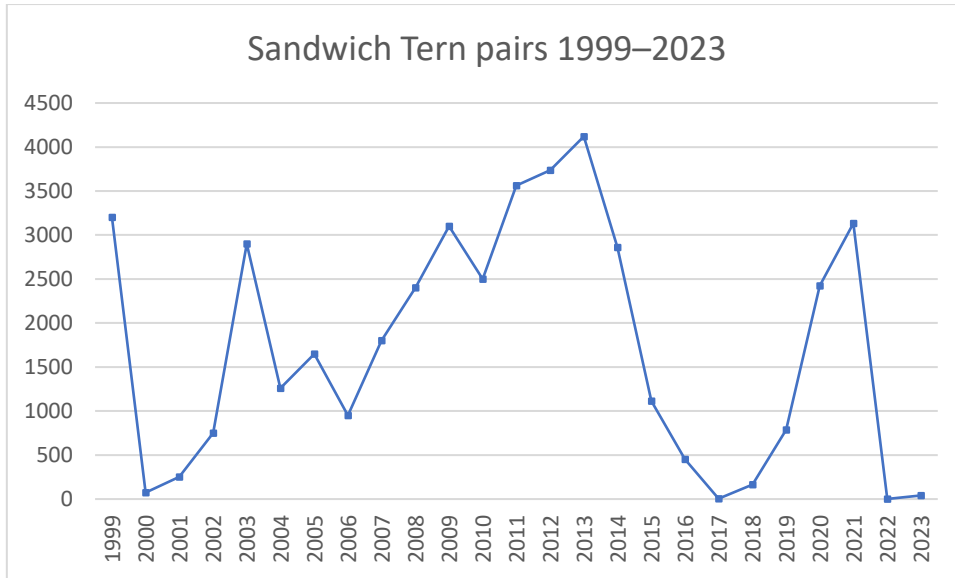


Figure 5. Sandwich Tern pairs 1999-2023

Little Tern *Sternula albifrons*

Amber list

Schedule 1

Numbers of pairs increased to 96 this year and successfully raised a minimum of 49 chicks giving a productivity figure of 0.51 (0.54).

Most pairs – 90 – formed a colony west of Gap and only six pairs nested at the Watch House. No chicks fledged from the Watch House.

No colour-ringed birds were recorded this year but all chicks at the Gap colony were colour ringed at the beginning of July – three black letters beginning with B on yellow rings.

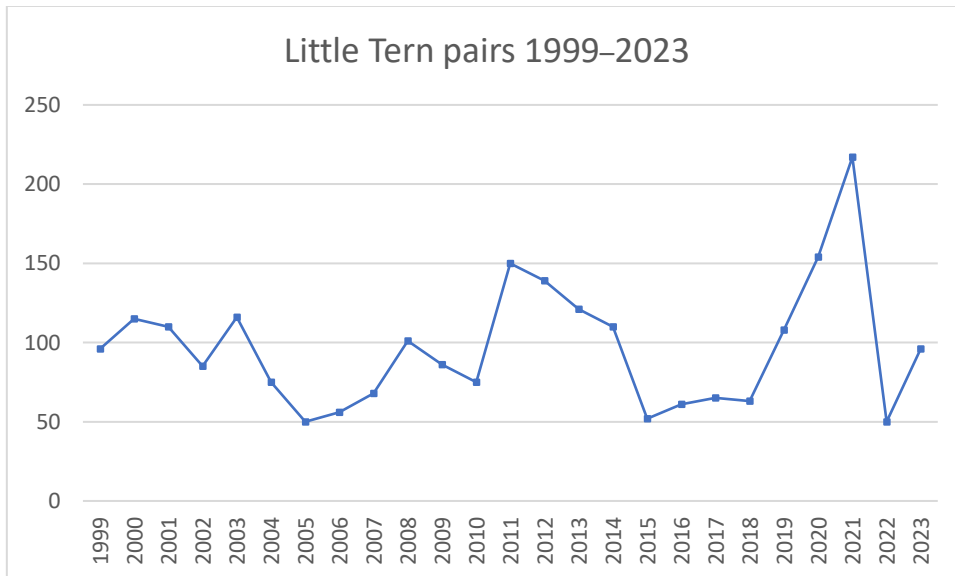


Figure 6. Little Tern pairs 1999-2023

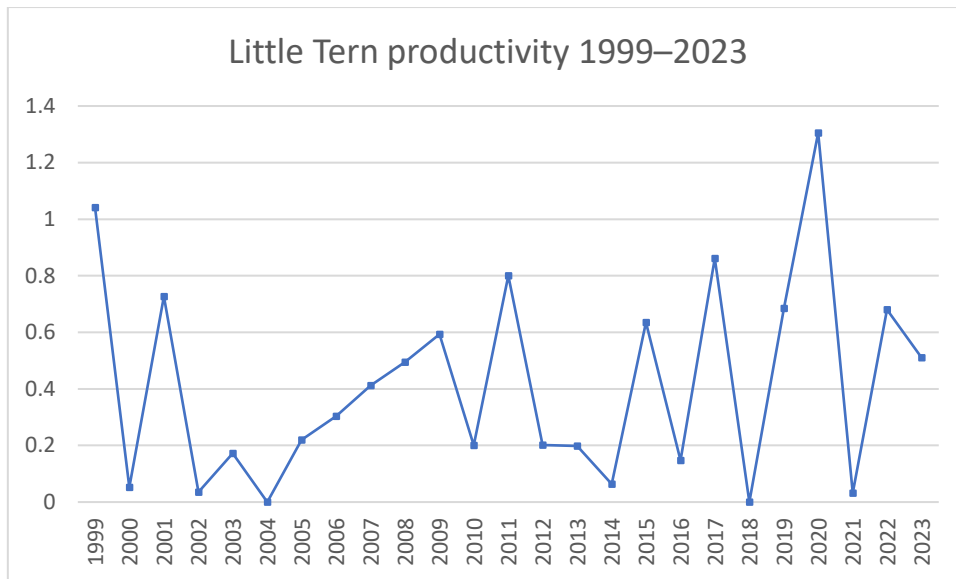


Figure 7. Little Tern productivity 1999-2023

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

Amber list

A peak of 39 pairs was recorded. Twenty-five of which were amongst the Black-headed Gulls west of Gap, the rest being split between middle and far point. A handful of broods were noted but no chicks fledged. As with Black-headed Gulls, rat and gull predation was noted.

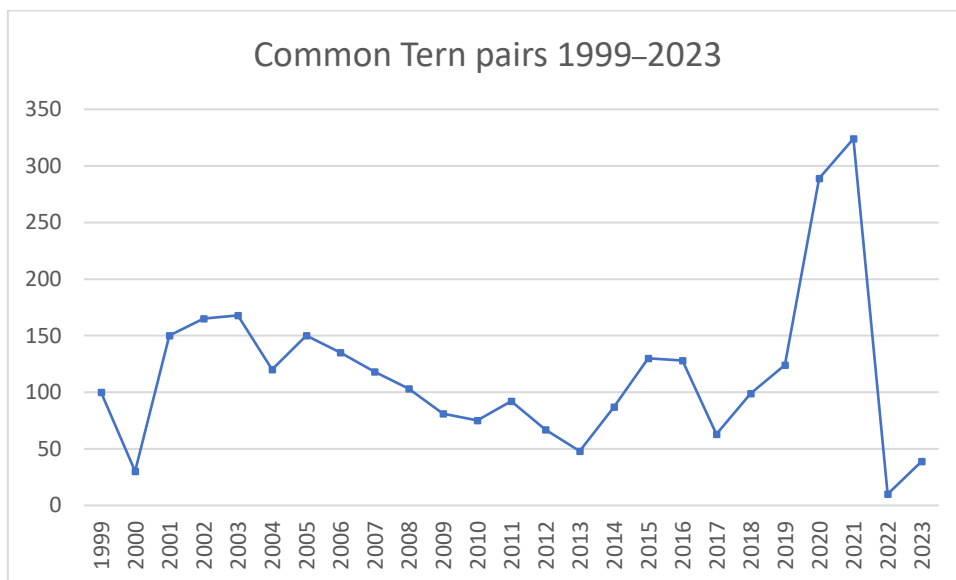


Figure 8. Common Tern pairs 1999-2023

Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*

Amber list

None nested.

Skylark *Alauda arvensis*

Red list

Surveys throughout the season recorded 47 territories in total.

Swallow *Hirundo rustica* Green list
 Following removal of the old tern hide this was the fourth year in a row where no swallows have nested.

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* Amber list
 Two birds held territory between the wreck of the silver dawn and the Watch House during June and July but there was no confirmed breeding attempt.

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* Amber list
 Nine territories were recorded and numerous broods were seen.

Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* Red list
 None nested. The nestbox that a single pair used last year remained empty this year.

Stonechat *Saxicola rubicola* Green list
 The Stonechat's rise as a breeding species plateaued this year. A total of five pairs were recorded, a slight dip from last year's six. Second broods were noted.

Dunnock *Prunella modularis* Amber list
 Six territories were recorded, a slight drop from last year.

Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba yarrellii* Green list
 Once again a single pair nested under the tin roof of the Lifeboat House and successfully raised one brood.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* Amber list
 Surveys recorded a total of 56 territories throughout the season.

Linnet *Linaria cannabina* Red list
 Linnet numbers were once again estimated from the size of post-breeding flocks. Numbers indicate around 25 pairs nested on the point this year.

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* Amber list
 Surveys recorded 20 pairs throughout the season.

Comments and observations

Little Tern summary

Little terns had a relatively successful season on Blakeney Point in 2023.

Following the first reports of Little Terns at NWT Cley Marshes on the 24th of April, the first returners to the point were seen on the 2nd of May at both the Watch House and the Gap. Up to 40 birds were around the Watch House colony through May and the first nest was found there on the 25th. Despite the promising numbers showing interest only six pairs went on to nest at the Watch House and didn't raise any chicks. The persistent attention of a pair of young Kestrels through June no doubt played a part in the lack of success. Adding to the predation pressure, stoats and fox were observed or caught on camera in the latter half of the season. A very different situation played out west of Gap, however, where 90 pairs successfully raised a minimum of 49 chicks. In total 96 pairs nested on the Point this year and successfully raised 49 chicks, a productivity figure of 0.51. All chicks at the Gap colony were colour ringed at the start of July – combinations are three black letters beginning with B on yellow rings. We didn't have to wait long for the first resighting: BCS was seen with other Little Tern fledglings at Eccles-on-sea, 20 days after ringing. A further resighting came at the beginning of November when an individual was reported from the Banc d'Arguin in Mauritania.

Rats continue to be a problem on the point. Although they didn't have a big impact on the success of the Little Terns this year. Early nests presumably benefitted from a reduced rat population following a cold winter and the buffer of the other tern and gull colonies between the dunes and the shingle. Later nests were affected, and rats were seen preying on nests overnight on several occasions through July. As winters get warmer and more carrion is provided by the ever-expanding seal colony, rats will continue to be a problem and an effective solution needs to be found. We continue to work and seek advice to find an effective rat control regime following the failure of current control measures.

There was no evidence of HPAI in Little Terns on the Point this year.

Acknowledgements

Breeding bird surveys were carried out by Duncan Halpin, Callum Peel, and Thomas Lloyd with assistance from Richard Porter and Malcolm Davies. Special thanks go to the volunteers who protect the Watch House Little Tern colony through the summer.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Historical breeding bird data

Table 2. Breeding bird species on Blakeney Point 2012-2022

Species	Number of breeding pairs										
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Shelduck	50	65	68	59	61	62	40	38	37	54	61
Shoveler	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
Gadwall	3	4	5	5	5	3	5	8	4	3	6
Mallard	5	5	4	6	7	3	7	8	4	4	8
Grey Partridge	5	9	7	5	7	11	7	10	7	4	2
Pheasant	1	1	1	3	5	3	2	5	4	4	5
Red-legged Partridge	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Stock Dove	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1
Woodpigeon	1	2	1	1	2	6	1	1	2	0	0
Oystercatcher	103	102	85	79	84	64	79	68	71	68	70
Avocet	9	12	13	16	17	15	10	15	11	9	15
Ringed Plover	14	12	11	13	11	12	9	13	12	10	14
Redshank	15	15	16	17	19	19	18	14	19	17	19
Black-headed Gull	2000	2200	2419	2104	875	505	301	319	224	722	138
Mediterranean Gull	12	15	8	4	5	4	0	1	0	2	0
Common Gull	0	2	3	2	2		3	3	3	3	0
Herring Gull	3	12	3	6	19	118	39	42	39	64	39
Lesser Black-backed Gull	0	1	1	1	4	48	3	3	10	14	11
Sandwich Tern	3575	4120	2859	1113	451	3	165	788	2425	3134	1
Little Tern	139	121	110	52	61	65	63	108	154	217	50
Common Tern	67	48	87	130	128	60	99	124	289	324	10
Arctic Tern	7	5	4	4	3	4	7	2	1	3	0
Skylark	35	33	39	49	48	28	25	25	40	42	41
Swallow	5	3	2	1	2	2	1	1	0	0	0
Sedge Warbler	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Wren	9	8	4	9	6	6	7	15	12	5	9
Starling	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Stonechat	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	6
Dunnock	11	10	11	14	7	8	7	4	6	4	8
Pied Wagtail	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	1
Meadow Pipit	110	100	102	128	151	84	51	45	51	52	58
Linnet	30	40	45	59	54	32	20	20	35	28	30
Reed Bunting	22	16	27	38	27	29	16	18	19	18	20

Appendix 2: Maps of breeding species

The approximate location and composition of colonies on Blakeney Point.

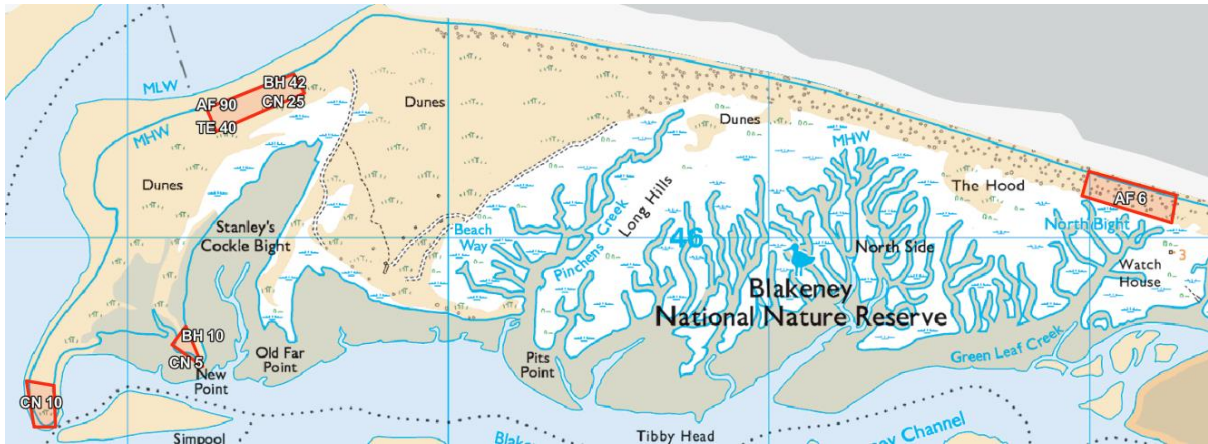


Figure 9. Colony locations 2023. Map ©Crown Copyright and database right 2023 Ordnance Survey 100023974

BG: Black-headed Gull, TE: Sandwich Tern, AF: Little Tern, CN: Common Tern