

## Threats to nesting terns at Dalkey

Terns usually choose to nest on islands for several reasons: most are free of native predators such as Red Foxes and Stoats and also tend to be disturbed less by humans and their dogs. Maiden Rock is too small and devoid of terrestrial vegetation to make it hospitable to most native and non-native predators with the exception of other local breeding birds such as Peregrine Falcon or Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls. The main threat to terns nesting on Maiden Rock is currently from a likely rising sea-level and shift to prevailing weather systems from the north and east in summer months. The low-lying islet is very vulnerable to being over-washed by the sea and this happened repeatedly during the period 2007-2010. Lamb Island is much higher, is vegetated and would be a more secure long-term option for the terns but it too poses conservation challenges. Dalkey Island and Lamb are

connected at lower tide levels and thus 'share' a wholly introduced



Fence erected for terns on Lamb Island.

mammal fauna of Brown Rats, Rabbits and Feral Goats.

Rats eat both tern eggs and chicks and would need to be eradicated before most of the breeding terns on Maiden Rock can be 'persuaded' to move to a new island.

The present fence on Lamb protects an area from trampling and grazing by goats for any terns making the switch.

The Dalkey Islands are designated as a Special Protection Area (SPA). An SPA is a European designation for sites which support internationally important populations of birds. BirdWatch Ireland and Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council will continue to work towards making these islands a safe haven for all breeding terns and also to give the public the opportunity to enjoy their diverse natural heritage.



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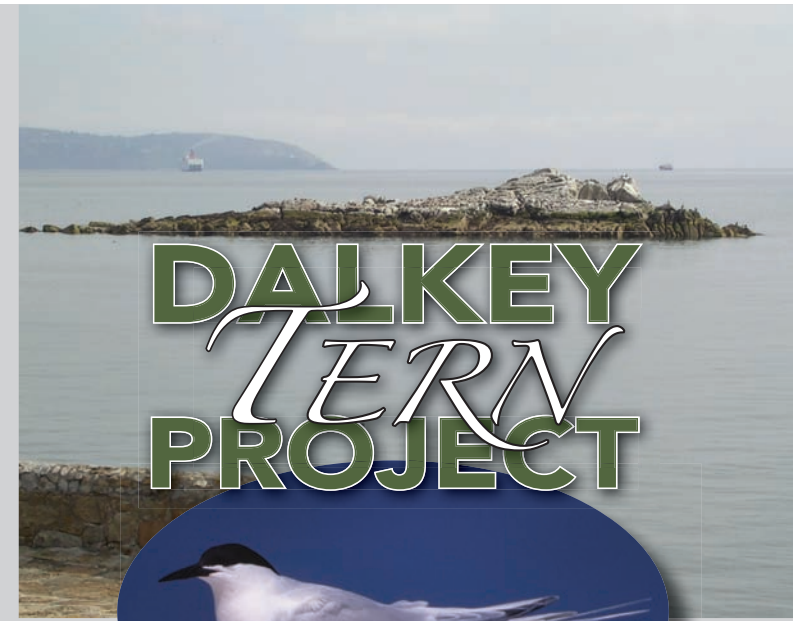
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# DALKEY TERN PROJECT



A joint initiative to protect and increase the colony of terns on the Dalkey islands



## What is a tern and how do I recognise the different species?

Terns are small, graceful, migratory seabirds. There are five species of tern breeding in colonies, mostly on islands, around Ireland, and three of these breed here in Dalkey. They resemble small gulls, but with a black cap and distinctly forked tail: this feature has earned them the name 'sea swallow'. Although their largely grey and white colouration is similar to common species of gull such as Herring Gull and Black-headed Gull, their behaviour is radically different. Terns hover above the sea and make spectacular 'plunge-dives' to catch small energy-rich fish such as sandeels and sprats, whereas gulls tend to swim or pick prey from the surface during flight.

**Sandwich Tern** The largest tern with a small crest and black bill, tipped yellow. There are large colonies in Down and Wexford but non-breeding birds are widespread in the Irish Sea throughout the summer. Such birds regularly visit Dublin Bay and plunge-dive for fish around Dalkey.

**Common Tern** This species has a reddish bill with a dark tip. Some of the largest Irish colonies are in Dublin: 500 pairs nest opposite the ferry terminal in Dublin Port and 1,500 pairs nest on Rockabill off Skerries.

**Roseate Tern** In May-June this species has a black bill and pinkish wash on the breast, very long tail streamers and overall looks whiter than the other species; in July and August the bill becomes red at the base. Only 3 colonies in Ireland: Rockabill (1,000+ pairs), Lady's Island Lake (Wexford,

### The five species of Tern that breed in Ireland



Sandwich Tern



Common Tern



Roseate Tern



Arctic Tern



Little Tern

100+pairs) and, though small in comparison, Dalkey Island (1-11 pairs).

**Arctic Tern** Somewhat dumper, and slightly smaller and greyer than the other species with dull blood-red bill. Small numbers nest in Dublin at all tern colonies.

**Little Tern** Distinguished by its small size and largely yellow bill with black tip. Unusual amongst terns in that it nests on mainland sand and shingle beaches such as at Kilcoole (Wicklow). Formerly nested on Dublin's Bull Island but now rarely seen anywhere in Dublin Bay.



Common Tern eggs

# History of the Dalkey Tern Colony

Two species of tern, the Common Tern and the Arctic Tern, have regularly nested on the Dalkey islands. There are usually 20-40 pairs of Common and 10-20 pairs of Arctic; the former primarily nest on the bare granite islet known as Maiden Rock, whereas the Arctics occupy both Maiden Rock and sometimes also the better vegetated Lamb Island that is connected to the main Dalkey Island at low tide. Common Terns nest on the bare rock in slight depressions, which we fill with gravel before the season begins, and three eggs are usually laid at the end of May or in the first half of June. Arctic Terns lay only two eggs on the grassy, rocky knolls of Lamb Island or amongst the Commons on Maiden Rock. The eggs are incubated by both parents and hatch after about 3 weeks. The newly hatched chicks are brooded by the female for a few days but soon both parents are working hard to catch sufficient high-energy small fish (sandeels and sprats) to satisfy their rapidly growing chicks. The young move around the islands and often take shelter in the boxes during periods of wet (or hot) weather. They take their first flight when they are just over 3 weeks old, although they are probably dependent on their parents for food for another month or more. Fledging usually takes place in July and by the end of the month the 'resident' Dalkey terns are joined by many more that have nested elsewhere including up to 100 Roseate Terns that have bred on Rockabill Island. This makes Dalkey one of the best places in Europe for birdwatchers to see this enigmatic species...in a capital city and reachable by public transport!

This post-breeding, pre-migratory congregation exploits an abundance of small fish in the greater Dublin Bay area in the late summer. During September all species head south, with Common and Roseate Terns wintering on the west coast of Africa while the Arctics continue on to the Southern Oceans in one of the longest known migratory journeys of any bird.



Securing nest boxes to Maiden Rock to prevent their loss during storms.

The Roseate Tern (*Sterna dougalli*) is a threatened species in Europe, and has been the main focus of the conservation efforts on the Dalkey islands. In 2004 a small number of Roseate Terns commenced nesting in the boxes at Dalkey as they do on Rockabill. In early May, members of the South Dublin Branch of BirdWatch Ireland visit Maiden Rock where we place Roseate Tern nestboxes, attach them securely to the rock and spread gravel in and around the boxes and in natural depressions in the rocks. This is re-arranged by terns into a nest scrape which helps prevent the eggs rolling or being washed away by rain. Roseate Terns usually lay 1-2 eggs and their

young differ from the others in that they remain in the boxes until they are ready to fledge. During the course of the breeding season visits are made to Maiden Rock to weigh and measure chicks and fit them with uniquely numbered bird rings. Disturbance is kept to a minimum and no harm comes to the chicks during this procedure. Rings are very important in supplying valuable information about the birds' migration paths and their winter destinations.



Putting a ring on a Roseate Tern chick on Maiden Rock, June 2010



Juvenile Roseate Tern