

# Failing to fledge: why are UK little tern (*Sternula albifrons*) populations declining?

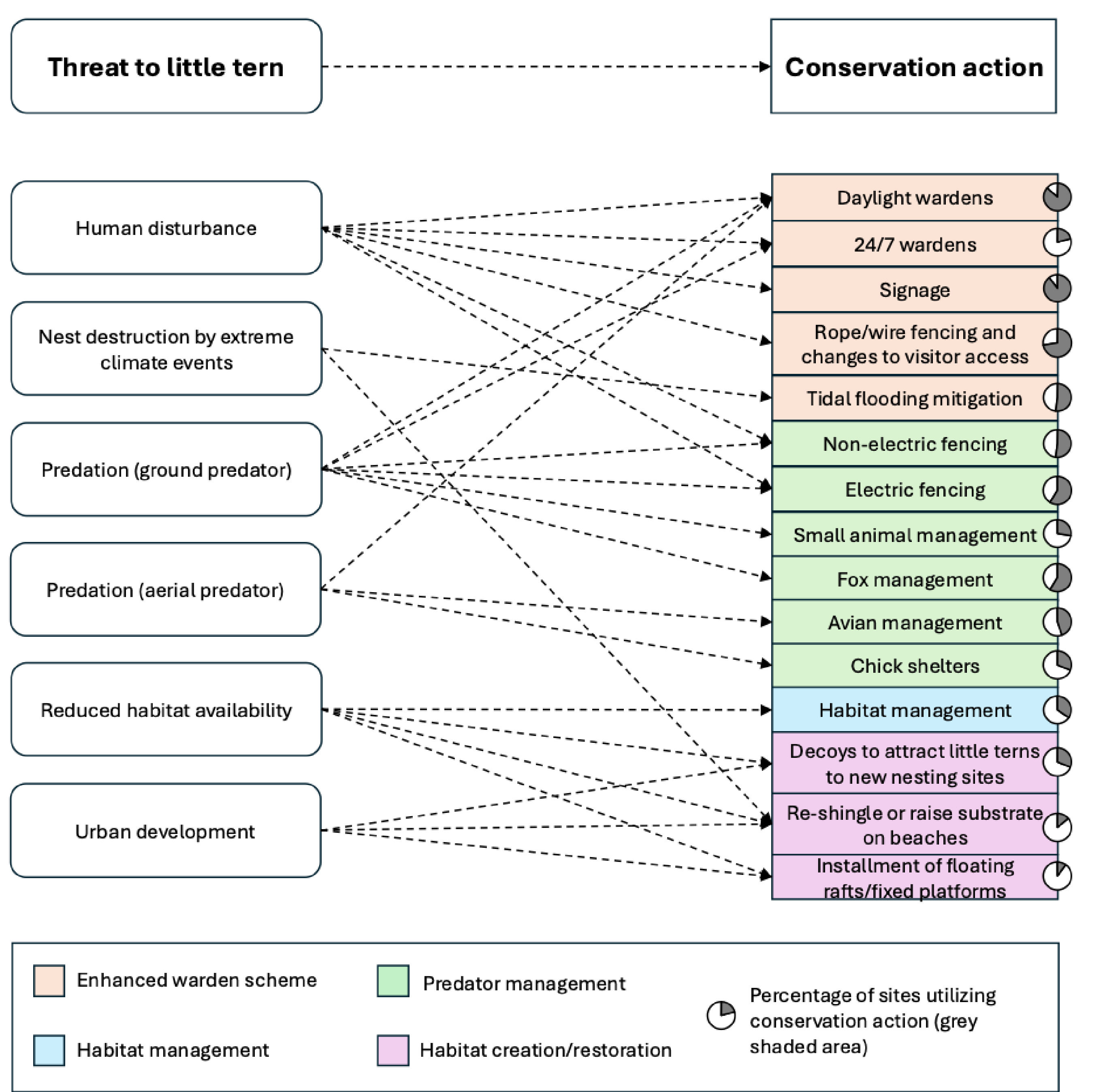
Jasmine Appelboom

Supervised by Dr Rebecca Senior

Department of Biosciences, Durham University

## Introduction

In the last three decades, UK little tern populations have declined by 37% (Wilson et al., 2020). As the UK's second rarest seabird, numerous conservation actions have been employed to increase their population sizes (Smart and Amar, 2018). Despite annual employment of electric fencing, signage, wardens, and predator control measures, UK little tern populations are projected to continue declining (Wilson et al., 2020).



## Results

- International conservation status of little terns (least concern, (Birdlife International, 2019)) inconsistent with intensity of conservation work in UK.
- Current conservation practices successfully slow population decline but are insufficient in restoring little tern populations to stable levels.
- Most predators of the little tern are opportunistic, facultative scavengers, for example: red foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*), various gull species, and carrion crows (*Corvus corone*) (Catry and Granadeiro, 2006; Ratcliffe et al., 2008).
- Urban development is a driver of habitat loss. Consequently, little terns are concentrated into fewer, larger colonies that are more vulnerable to stochastic events (Rowell, 2020; Wilson et al., 2020).

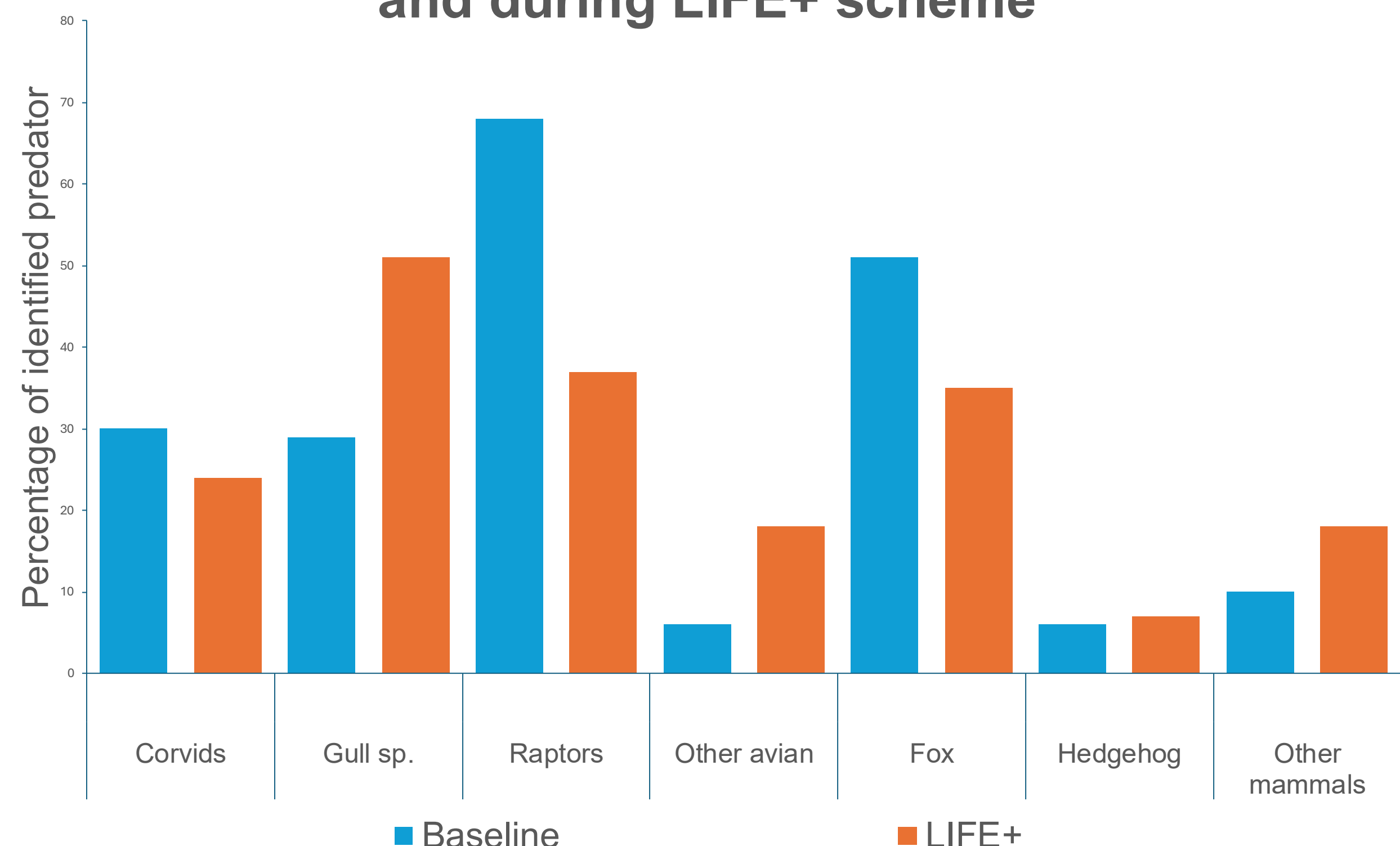
## Conclusions

Ultimately, the cause of little tern population declines cannot be pinpointed to one threat. Underlying threats such as climate change and urban development exacerbate more obvious threats such as predation, human disturbance, and coastal flooding.

Balancing funding, species priority, public interest, and practicality of conservation work is extremely difficult to achieve. Despite this, little tern conservation efforts have trebled breeding success (Wilson et al., 2020).

Whilst little tern populations may remain in decline, it is clear conservation efforts are working to stabilise their UK populations.

## Identified predators of little terns before and during LIFE+ scheme



## References

- Wilson, L.J., Rendell-Read, S., Lock, L., Drewitt, A., Bolton, M. (2020) "Effectiveness of a five-year project of intensive, regional-scale, coordinated management for little terns *Sternula albifrons* across the major UK colonies," *Journal for Nature Conservation*, 53. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jnc.2019.125779>.
- Smart, J. and Amar, A. (2018) "Diversionary feeding as a means of reducing raptor predation at seabird breeding colonies," *Journal for Nature Conservation*, 46, pp. 48–55. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jnc.2018.09.003>.
- Birdlife International (2019) "Sternula albifrons", *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species*. Available at: <https://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2018-2.RLTS.T22694656.A155476219.en>
- Catry, T. and Granadeiro, J.P. (2006) "Failure of Methiocarb to Produce Conditioned Taste Aversion in Carrion Crows Consuming Little tern Eggs", *Waterbirds: The International Journal of Waterbird Biology*. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4132571?seq=1&cid=pdf->
- Ratcliffe, N., Schmitt, S., Mayo, A., Drewitt, A. (2008) "Colony habitat selection by Little terns *Sternula albifrons* in East Anglia: implications for coastal management", *SEABIRD* 21, pp. 55-63
- Rowell, H. (2020) *Definition of Favourable Conservation Status for Little tern Sternula albifrons Defining Favourable Conservation Status Project*. Available at: [www.gov.uk/natural-england](http://www.gov.uk/natural-england).
- MHOvi07 (2025) Little tern (*Sternula albifrons*) brooding chick and eggs on sandy nest.png [Online Image]. Available at: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Little\\_tern\\_%28Sternula\\_albifrons%29\\_brooding\\_chick\\_and\\_eggs\\_on\\_sandy\\_nest.png#filehistory](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Little_tern_%28Sternula_albifrons%29_brooding_chick_and_eggs_on_sandy_nest.png#filehistory)

