

The management of public access to safeguard nesting shorebirds in Beadnell Bay

Introduction

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) are designated by the Government for the purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty in England and Wales' finest landscapes.

Natural beauty isn't limited to the view – it covers all the elements that make the Area a special place, including habitats and species, the built and cultural environment and tranquillity.

The role of the Partnership is to pursue and champion the purposes of designation of the Northumberland Coast AONB and to assist in the delivery of the partners' statutory duties and other management aspirations in respect of the AONB.

Purpose

The purpose of this position statement, which has been agreed by the AONB Partnership, is to provide clarity to land managers, Parish Councils and local people on the view of the Partnership regarding the management of public access to protect breeding shorebirds in Beadnell Bay.

Background

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 (SPA) 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 and Arctic Terns.

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 (SAC) 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 across the UK is -18%. This is in contrast to Beadnell Bay where in recent years the population has remained relatively stable. The highest ever productivity at the site occurred in 2019. 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.

Access arrangements

Purchase of 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 of the designated site 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, which has resulted in the highest ever productivity in 2019.
- Reducing disturbance to Arctic Terns, with highest ever numbers nesting at the site in 2018.
- Adding a significant 'buffer' around the Little Tern colony to afford them greater protection particularly from dogs off-lead and from 'colony-wide' disturbance.
- Providing a safe nesting place in the likely event of the burn changing course or dune profiles changing.

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. 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 diverted visitors to an alternative route through a low-point in the dunes known as 'Miller's Nick' and although not ideal, this alternative worked for the vast 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.

Towards the end of the 2020 breeding season and throughout the winter, a small group of local people have written to Beadnell Parish Council, National Trust and the AONB Partnership questioning the need for access restrictions on the north side of the burn mouth and lately a local petition has been organised to ensure public access (where possible) is always available along Beadnell Bay.

Partnership Position

1. Protecting the breeding shorebirds in Beadnell Bay from accidental or wilful human disturbance is critical to their success. Whilst some natural predation and disturbance can't be mitigated against, such as birds of prey, the National Trust will be supported to do everything in their power to prevent human disturbance.
2. Where providing access for recreation on the coast conflicts with actions to conserve nature, nature conservation will take priority.
3. Breeding shorebirds are protected by law and disturbance, even if this is unintentional. It is a criminal offence punishable by imprisonment. To protect those visitors who are unaware of the bird's presence from inadvertently disturbing them and committing an offence, access restrictions are required.
4. Access restrictions for the duration of the breeding season are inevitable to ensure the protection of the birds. The Partnership will support whatever access restrictions that National Trust deem necessary to adequately protect the birds.
5. The Partnership and staff team will support National Trust to ensure that any access restrictions are clearly understood by visitors at the earliest opportunity through pre-arrival information, signage on site and at departure points and volunteers providing information where possible.
6. The Partnership staff team will work with National Trust to foster a greater local connection with the breeding shorebirds in Beadnell through a series of events and activities.
7. The Partnership staff team will work with Northumberland County Council to ensure that the alternative route - the Northumberland Coast Path - is clearly signed and waymarked from the car park and through the caravan parks to avoid conflict between residents and visitors.
8. The Partnership staff will maintain an open channel of communication between all interested parties.

Policy context

The position of the AONB Partnership on this matter contributes to the delivery of the AONB Management Plan, specifically:

Objective One: To conserve and enhance important habitats and populations of important species

And is supported by:

Policy 1.1 Networks of priority habitats will be conserved, enhanced and expanded to provide resilient ecological networks across the AONB. Habitats will be created and managed to support priority species.

Policy 11.1 Good quality information that encourages responsible visits to the AONB will be provided to a wide audience