



# LITTLE TERN *(Sternula albifrons)*

## Ambassador of the Living Drava



Dear kayakers, fishermen and friends of my Drava!

My name is Nika, I am a Little tern, the smallest tern of all. We used to be much more frequent neighbours along your beautiful rivers Mura and Drava. Each year in the spring we would come in large numbers from Africa, our wintering place, to this amazing green oasis called the “Amazon of Europe”. Here on beautiful and isolated gravel and sand bars we would spend our springs and summers and bring our young into the world, ensuring the survival of our species. All this has changed over the last few decades. We were once a great bird nation, but now our continental Little tern populations have been decimated. Today, only a few rivers in Europe can be called our home. And **only four breeding pairs** on average are located on the Drava River in Croatia. Why are we on the brink of extinction? Well, there are many reasons, but the main one is the destruction of my natural rivers by hydropower plants construction, river regulation and sediment extraction that has led to a loss of gravel and sand bars, which are our main habitat.

Now small sections of the Drava River are my only home. Here I can still find some breeding places on rare gravel and sand bars. In shallow water zones, bays and oxbows I can find enough fish to feed myself and my hungry little ones.

When we heard that the DRAVA LIFE project is going to restore and create new gravel and sand bars and side-arms, my friends and I were really excited. Finally, more space for new families will be made. Everyone can also help us by not stepping on gravel and sand bars during our breeding season and not disturbing our chicks in nests. This will allow us to increase in number and ensure that we will once again be frequent neighbours on the Drava enjoying each other's company.

Yours sincerely,

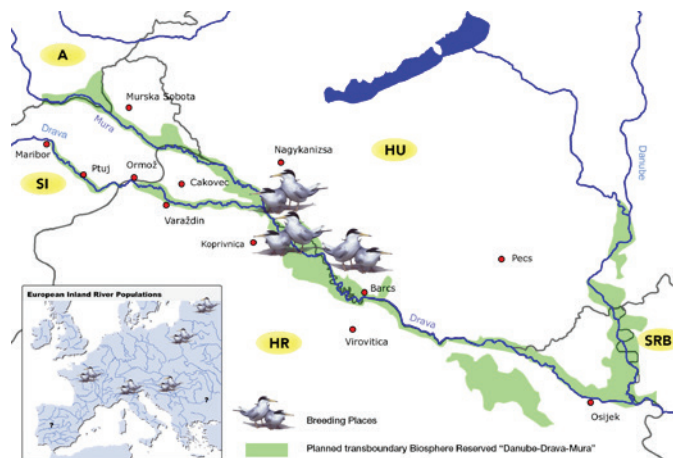
Nika  
Little tern



## APPEARANCE & BEHAVIOUR

Little terns (*Sternula albifrons*) are related to gulls. Their bodies are slender with narrow wings and forked tails. They are **fully adapted to dive-hunt for fish** in rivers and seas. They typically have neat white foreheads, yellow bills, and orange-yellow legs. Their long and narrow wings are grey, with a white underside. Chicks are grey, brown and yellow and are **perfectly adapted to the nesting habitats of vegetation-free gravel and sand bars and islands**. Little terns are social birds that migrate in small flocks, usually in family groups.

## LITTLE TERN IN NUMBERS



Size: **20-28cm**

Weight avg: **50g** Age avg: **8** (max. observed 23 years and 11 months)

**FOOD**  
mainly fish but also crustaceans, insects and molluscs

Wing span: **47cm**

**BREEDING**  
female lays 2-3 eggs, chicks hatch in 21-24 days

Estimated population in Croatia:

- 4** breeding pairs on average on the Drava River
- 16-20** breeding pairs on the Sava River<sup>1</sup>
- 25-60** breeding pairs in total in Croatia<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Radović, D., Tutiš, V. (2013): Little tern *Sterna albifrons*. In: Tutiš, V., Kralj, J., Radović, D., Čiković, D., Barišić, S. (ur.): Red Book of Birds of Croatia. Ministry of Environment and Nature Protection, State Institute for Nature Protection, Zagreb: 169-171.

<sup>2</sup> European Red List of Birds, BirdLife International (2015)



# HABITAT & THREATS

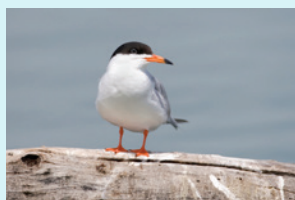


In Europe only a few rivers have suitable habitats for the Little tern (e.g. Loire in France, Vistula in Poland, Po in Italy, Sava and Drava in Croatia). Bigger populations

live along European coasts. The last breeding places can be found on the 50 km long free flowing stretch of the Drava River in Koprivnica-Križevci County in Croatia.

**Little terns' riverine habitats, gravel and sand bars, along the Drava in Croatia have been degraded by river regulation, gravel and sand extraction, and hydropower plant construction. Human disturbance of last nesting sites on gravel and sand bars threatens the remaining breeding pairs.**

The presence of Little terns is an indicator for dynamic river stretches with sand and gravel bars, steep banks and side arms, which are also home to other endangered river bird species depending on dynamic habitats, including:



Common tern (*Sterna hirundo*)



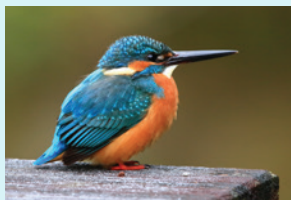
Common sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucos*)



Little ringed plover (*Charadrius dubius*)



Sand martin (*Riparia riparia*)



Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*)



Bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*)



# SOLUTIONS



For the preservation of the last remaining breeding pairs, it is necessary to **restore river dynamics and allow the Drava to create new gravel and sand bars and to prevent disturbance of birds** during the nesting season on the river Drava.

This is exactly the main goal of the DRAVA LIFE restoration project.



## HOW CAN YOU HELP?

**Do not step on the gravel and sand bars particularly during breeding season, from mid-April until the end of July!**



**Ivica Sabolić**, president of the Association of Fishermen Clubs Koprivnica:

*"Protecting the Little tern, the ambassador of the living Drava, is very important for us as responsible fishermen who respect the nature around us when we are on the Drava River. In order to preserve our small population we banned fishing on gravel and sand bars on our part of the Drava and we are urging our fishermen to respect the rules, follow our information, and not disturb birds, particularly during the breeding and nesting season."*



**Zlatko Moškon**, secretary of the Drava Documentation Centre:

*"We kayakers enjoy an unspoilt Drava with its great wildlife, which can only be preserved if also we make our contribution. Therefore, in order to protect the habitats of the Little tern we urge all kayakers, canoeists and tourists not to stop or camp on the gravel and sand bars of the Drava River, particularly during the breeding season."*

### Legal protection

Little tern is a strictly protected bird in Croatia according to the Nature Protection Act (OG 80/13) and Ordinance on strictly protected species (OG 144/13 and 73/16). It is listed in the Red Book of Birds of Croatia. It is internationally protected under the EU Birds Directive (Annex 1), Natura 2000 and the Bern and Bonn Conventions. It is strictly prohibited to:

- intentionally capture and/or kill
- intentionally disturb, particularly during periods of mating, raising young and migration
- intentionally destroy and/or take eggs
- intentionally damage and/or destroy their developmental stages and nests
- damage or destroy areas for mating or resting.

**Based on Ordinance on the fees for damages incurred from impermissible activities with protected animal species (OG 84/96 and 79/02), the fine for killing a Little tern is 10.800 HRK.**



# DRAVALIFE

integrated river management

[www.drava-life.hr](http://www.drava-life.hr)

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## PARTNERS & CO-FINANCIERS:



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# LITTLE TERN

(*Sternula albifrons*)

**Order:** Charadriiformes - shorebirds

**Family:** *Laridae* - gulls and terns

**Vulnerability category in Croatia:**

endangered (EN) nesting population

**Population trends:** declining

**Estimated population in Croatia:**

4 breeding pairs on average on the Drava River

16-20 breeding pairs on the Sava River

25-60 breeding pairs in total in Croatia

