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BREEDING STATUS OF THE SLENDER-BILLED GULL (*Larus genei*) IN THE MEDITERRANEAN BASIN

by

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I. THE BREEDING AREA OUTSIDE THE MEDITERRANEAN BASIN

The Slender-billed Gull (*Larus genei*) has a wide breeding area ranging from Kazakhstan and Afghanistan/Pakistan to West Africa (for overviews, see Erard, 1964; Isenmann, 1982; Cramp & Simmons, 1982). As for the Mediterranean Gull (*Larus melanocephalus*), the bulk with about 30,000 to 35,000 breeding pairs, breeds in the south-west Soviet Union (the northern Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, several lakes in Kazakhstan and on one occasion in 1925 at Lake Termakul in southern Siberia (see also Siokhin *et al.*, 1988). Other high numbers bred in Iran (4,000 to 5,500 breeding pairs in 1969-1977, mainly at Lake Urmia). The breeding figures in Pakistan (between Karachi and the Iranian border) and Afghanistan (where breeding was recorded in 1966, Niethammer, 1971) as well as those in Iraq (in the Euphrates and Tigris inundation zone between Baghdad and Basrah) are unknown. It is even dubious that the species is still breeding in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the west, on the African coast, the breeding sites were only recently discovered. The first was that of the Banc d'Arguin (Mauritania) where 770-870 breeding pairs were censused in 1959-1965 (Naurois, 1959), 1,733 in 1974 (Trotignon, 1976) and 1,610 in 1985 (Campredon, 1987). A second group of breeding sites (4 in all) exists in Senegal, totalling 2,500 breeding pairs in 1979 and 5,000 breeding pairs in 1983 (Dupuy, *in* Mayaud, 1983; see also Latour, 1973; Dupuy, 1975; Dupuy & Verschuren, 1978 and Gowthorpe, 1979). A not further documented breeding record was also found in 1976 in Fuerteventura (Canary Islands) (Hülsmann *in* Cramp & Simmons, 1982). Some breeding pairs have also been found in 1967, 1985, 1986 on the Khnifiss lagoon (Thévenot *et al.*, 1989), and in 1966 on the Iriki (Robin, 1968) in south Morocco.

II. THE SITUATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN BASIN

The following countries are concerned (see Figure 1):

Turkey

A first breeding record in 1968 and a few others in the 1970s on Anatolian lakes showed that it was then the most abundant and widespread gull there. K. Warncke (*in* Isenmann, 1982) estimated that the population reached about 3,100 pairs; the largest known colony at Seyfe Gölü amounted to 2,100 pairs in 1971 (see also Husband & Kasperek, 1984). M. Kasperek (*in litt.* and 1985) informed us that recent breeding was found in 1982 (Kulu Gölü 100 breeding pairs and Bolluk Gölü 100 breeding pairs), 1983 (Seyfe Gölü >60 breeding pairs), in 1985 (Yirtnak/Sultan lakes 100 breeding pairs) and in 1987 (Eregli/Düden Gölü 1-2 breeding pairs). Thus, the Anatolian lakes remain an important breeding centre.

Egypt

Goodman and Meininger (1989) mentioned a breeding record in 1938 near El Malaha (Mediterranean coast). In 1979, 200-400 pairs bred there and breeding was again suspected in

1986 when up to 2,000 adults were observed on 4 July. In 1984 and 1986, adults were also seen during the breeding season at Lake Qarun, and in 1986 breeding appeared likely from the Faiyum.

Greece

Bauer *et al.* (1969) mentioned it as a very rare breeding species. Its breeding was recorded at least in 1966 and in 1967 (a few breeding pairs) as well as in 1972 (100 pairs) in the Axios delta (Isenmann, 1982). It also bred at Alyki lagoon in 1974 (10-20 breeding pairs), in 1980 (40) and in 1985 (23), but none in 1987 and 1988 (Isenmann, 1982 and V. Goutner unpubl.).

Tunisia

Breeding records were found in 1960 (18-20 pairs) and 1966 (about 150 breeding pairs) on the Kneiss Islands (Castan, 1961 and Smart *in* Mayaud, 1970). Other records were suspected in 1970 and 1974 on the Sebkha Sidi Mansour and found in 1971 and 1972 (50-100 breeding pairs) near El Djem as well as in 1973 (50 breeding pairs) on the Sebkha Sidi El Hani (Isenmann, 1982). Recent breeding evidence was found in the salines of Sfax (about 200 breeding pairs) in 1985 (J. Walmsley, *in litt.*).

Breeding was also suspected in 1977 and 1978 at Lake Boughzoul in Algeria (Jacob, 1980).

Italy

Four breeding sites. The first has been in existence since 1976 where 365 pairs have bred near Cagliari (Sardinia). This population increased steadily reaching about 726 breeding pairs in 1980 and 870 in 1985 (Schenk *in* Isenmann, 1982). A breeding record of 2 breeding pairs in 1984 was established on Stagno Mulargia/Sant'Antioco, west of Cagliari (Fasola, 1986b). A third Sardinian breeding site was discovered in 1985 at "Sale Porcus" near Oristano (Grussu, 1985). In 1988, a total of 1,480 breeding pairs bred at Cagliari and near Oristano and a breeding attempt of 65 breeding pairs was found in the south-west of Sardinia (Grussu, Poddesu & Locci, unpubl.). The fourth breeding site is at Valli Comacchio (Ravenna) with 2 breeding pairs in 1978. For the fluctuation of breeding pairs in the subsequent years, see the Figure (Brichetti & Foschi, 1986; Fasola, 1986a; Brichetti & Foschi, *in litt.*).

France

Since the last century up until 1971, single pairs bred irregularly in the Camargue. In 1972, 3 breeding pairs among 11 adults attempted to breed and, in 1973, 12 breeding pairs produced 12 fledglings (Isenmann, 1976). Breeding has since occurred regularly and amounted to 88 breeding pairs in 1986 and even 286 breeding pairs in 1988 (Isenmann *et al.*, 1986; Johnson & Walmsley, *in litt.*). It is hoped this trend will continue.

Spain

At least three breeding sites exist. The oldest known is in the Marismas del Guadalquivir (Huelva/Sevilla) with up to 50 pairs in the first half of the present century (Valverde, 1960); since 1960, breeding has been irregular and in very low numbers (e.g. 16 breeding pairs in 1981 and 20 in 1982, Costa, 1985). A second site is at the Laguna de Fuente de Piedra (Malaga) where 3-11 pairs were recorded in 1965, 1966 and 1967 (Sarró & Pons Olivera, 1965; Westernhagen, 1966; Studer-Thiersch, 1968), recent breeding records could not be ascertained (Vargaz-Yanez *et al.*, 1983). A third site is in the Ebro delta (Tarragona) where 12 pairs bred for the first time in 1975 (Ferrer & Martinez-Vilalta, 1986). This population increased owing to protection, and amounted to 280 breeding pairs in 1984 (Ferrer & Martinez-Vilalta, 1986) and 429 breeding pairs in 1988 (Martinez-Vilalta, 1988).

III. REMARKS

The species has been for a long time a rather rare and irregular breeder in the western Mediterranean Basin. In Tunisia its breeding largely depends on suitable breeding sites (lagoons with islets after rainy winters and springs). It is probable that the breeding invaders to Sardinia came from Tunisia. The blooming of the Sardinian population probably stimulated the spread to northern Italy and north-eastern Spain as well as the increase in southern France. The breeding in these three countries was undoubtedly favoured by protection measures which provided regular and safe breeding sites and thus allowed high breeding output. The species also increased its number in West African breeding sites in Mauritania and Senegal. However, it remains unknown if these breeding sites are a recent discovery of an older settlement (this seems to be the case for Mauritania) or a recent south-westwards spread (Senegal). Furthermore, it must be recalled that the species disappeared as a breeder from Romania after 1925-1930 (Isenmann, 1982) and that breeding is only suspected in Bulgaria (Nankinov, this volume). In conclusion, for the Mediterranean Basin, the species increased and spread mostly towards the west thanks to protective measures. However, in Greece, it is not yet clear why it has only bred irregularly and in low numbers in the Axios delta. One explanation of the observed shift from the Axios delta to Alyki may be because of habitat destruction.

What are the basic requirements for successful breeding of this gull? One major problem is obviously to find predator-free and human undisturbed islets in a lagoon system. Moreover, these islands can be completely vegetationless or just covered with a very short or sparse vegetation. There, the birds generally form very compact colonies with small inter-nest distances. Companion species are sometimes Sandwich Tern (*Sterna sandvicensis*) and Gull-billed Tern (*Sterna nilotica*), rather than Mediterranean Gull (*Larus melanocephalus*) or Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*). The optimal feeding habitats are shallow, brackish lagoons where this gull preys mostly on fishes. Its long neck and bill seem to be adequate weapons to catch this sort of food item while swimming (Isenmann, 1976). In the Mediterranean Basin, the main known winter quarters are located in Egypt (several thousands) (Goodman & Meininger, 1989) and in Tunisia (15,484 birds in winter 1978, M. Czajkowski *in* Isenmann, 1982), only 100-200 birds were recently recorded in Spain (Carrera & Garcia, 1986; Carrera, 1988).

As for many other coastal species, its number and spread will greatly depend on protection measures (salines!) which would secure or provide the species requirements.

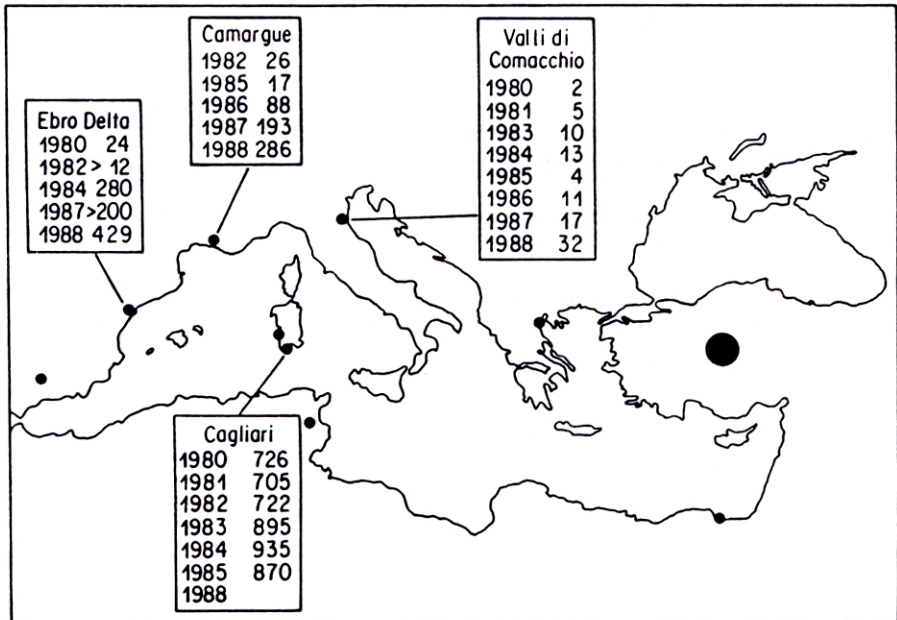


Figure 1: Breeding distribution of the Slender-billed Gull (*Larus genei*) in the Mediterranean Basin (the numbers of breeding pairs in recent years are given for the four main breeding sites. For further details and references see the text).

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ISENMANN, P. y GOUTNER, V. Estatus reproductor de la Gaviota picofina (*Larus genei*) en la cuenca del Mediterráneo.

RESUMEN

La Gaviota picofina cría en un área que se extiende desde Senegal (5.000 parejas nidificantes en 1983) y Mauritania (1.610 p.n. en 1985), en el oeste de Africa, hasta Asia Central y Afganistán-Pakistán, hacia el este. Pero el grueso de la población (de 30.000 a 35.000 parejas) cría en el suroeste de la Unión Soviética.

Durante las últimas tres décadas la especie se ha extendido a Italia (Cerdeña, cerca de 935 p.n. en 1984 y Valli di Comacchio, en Ravenna, con un máximo de 32 p.n. en 1988), Francia (Camargue, con 286 p.n. en 1988), España (delta del Ebro, con 429 p.n. en 1988 y marismas del Guadalquivir con 20 p.n. en 1982) y Turquía (Anatolia). También ha sido comprobada su cría en Egipto, Grecia, Marruecos y Túnez.

En este artículo se examinan las fluctuaciones de la población nidificante en la cuenca del Mediterráneo y se hacen algunos comentarios sobre los requerimientos ecológicos básicos de la especie. Las lagunas saladas o salobres pueden ser consideradas los lugares óptimos para la cría y la alimentación.

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