

## The Lesser Crested Tern (*Sterna bengalensis*) in the Evros delta (Greece): a case of pairing with the Sandwich Tern (*Sterna sandvicensis*)?

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**Key words:** Lesser Crested Tern (*Sterna bengalensis*) pairing, Evros delta, first record; Sandwich Tern (*Sterna sandvicensis*).

On June 11 1987, I visited an islet at the coastal region of the Evros delta, Greece (map in GOUTNER & KATTOULAS 1984) to study breeding larids accompanied by another biologist.

At the northern side of this islet in an extensive area of sandy beds and debris of woods there were colonies of Common and Little Terns, and one colony of Gull-billed Terns. Nine pairs of Sandwich Terns made a tightly packed colony close to the latter.

My surprise was very great when I noticed very close to a Sandwich Tern, an orange-billed Tern of similar size. We were able to watch this bird from a distance of about 300 m but moving closer disturbed and flushed all the colonies because of the open terrain. After confirming that there was only one bird which remained in place on 11 and 12 June, we erected a hide on 13 June. This was at a distance of about 25 m from the Sandwich Terns' colony near a large dry tree trunk to increase the effect of camouflage.

I entered the hide for about one hour to avoid further disturbing this area, which is the last breeding place of larids in the delta.

The orange-billed Tern alighted after the Sandwich Terns, and I was able to observe it from a distance of about 20 m, taking a series of photographs.

The bird was of similar size to the Sandwich Terns. Its bill seemed to be heavier with a yellow tip (Fig. 1, 2), although this could have been an effect of the contrary falling sunlight. Under this lighting condition I was able to see that the upperparts of the Tern were bluish grey, but darker than nearby Sandwich Terns (Fig. 1). In a sitting position, the primaries appeared partly brownish (Fig. 2). This dark appearance of outer wing was clearly visible in flight during an interaction with an adult Gull-billed Tern (Fig. 3). In this figure the white-tipped secondaries are also prominent, but unfortunately the pattern of the rump is not distinguishable due to overlighting, and I was not able to observe it under favourable conditions.

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Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.  
Fig. 1-4. Lesser Crested Tern and Sandwich Terns.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.

The combination of the above mentioned characters compared to the descriptions of the basic diagnostic features of Terns by GRANT (1984) and GANTLETT (1987) leads me to the conclusion that this bird was a Lesser Crested Tern, *Sterna bengalensis*. In recent years, adult Lesser Crested Terns have been observed in colonies of Sandwich Terns in other regions of the Mediterranean, both singly and in pairs (literature summarized in BRICHETTI & FOSCHI 1987). Experienced ornithologists doubt some of these sightings due to difficulties of field identification of these birds and the possibility of aberrant Sandwich Terns having orange bill (GRANT 1984, SMART 1984). However my observation did not finish here. I noticed that the Tern did not simply stay close to the Sandwich Tern colony, but stood mostly near to one particular corner. After the colony was flushed about five minutes after my entering the hide, the Tern approached a Sandwich Tern nest, bending its head above the two eggs in it. However, after the rapid approach of an adult Sandwich Tern (which finally sat on the eggs) the bird moved away. During a second flushing about fifteen minutes later, the Tern quickly approached the same nest and sat on the eggs (Fig. 4). It was only able to sit for about twenty seconds before the owner Sandwich Tern approached; the Lesser Crested Tern left the eggs without being chased. No other similar behaviour took place during my observation.

Thus, in addition to revealing the presence of a bird species never previously recorded in Greece, my observations verified a behaviour pattern infrequently reported by other observers. PETIT (1976) and CAMPREDON (1976) described mixed pairing of Sandwich and Lesser Crested Terns in Banc d'Arguin (France), but these identifications of Lesser Crested Terns were questioned by GRANT 1984. YEATMAN and GEROUDED & LANDENBERGUE (in CRAMP 1985) observed the same behaviour in the Ebro delta (Spain). Similar observations of a single Lesser Crested Tern being present in the colony rather than a pair, have been made by ISENMANN (1972) and DUBOIS (1983).

After my short observations, I cannot say if there was a mixed pair of Lesser Crested and Sandwich Terns, or if a single Lesser Crested Tern »attached« to a breeding pair of Sandwich Terns. However, breeding behaviour (incubation effort) of the Lesser Crested Tern was clear even though not accompanied by other ceremonies.

These observations and those reported previously raise some questions. It is generally known that data on Seabirds from the Eastern Mediterranean in particular are scarce. Was my observation of this behaviour in a Lesser Crested Tern in the Evros delta simply a matter of chance, or is this behaviour much more common than believed? And why have Lesser Crested Terns, either singly or in pairs, associated in all known cases only with Sandwich and not other Terns?

Perhaps these questions will be resolved by ornithologists in the near future.

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