

# The Lesser Crested Tern in the Western Mediterranean and Europe



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**T**he record of one breeding pair of Lesser Crested Terns *Sterna bengalensis* in the Valli di Comacchio, on the southern Po delta, Italy, during June 1985 stimulated us to investigate the status of the species in the Western Mediterranean (Brichetti & Foschi 1985). Recent sightings in the British Isles led Grant (1984) and Smart (1984) to write in *British Birds* about the complex problem of the identification of the species.

The Lesser Crested Tern is distributed unevenly from Australia to the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. In the Mediterranean, one colony was found in 1937 on a small island in the Gulf of Sirte off the Libyan coast (Moltoni 1938) and, although it presumably still exists (Bundy 1976), it has not been rechecked. In 1895, one breeding pair was noted on Nakle Lake in the Lebanon (Benson 1970), while there were significant breeding sightings in Tunisia in the first half of this century (Heim de Balsac & Mayaud 1962).

In the Mediterranean during the past five or six years, several instances of pure or mixed (with Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis*) breeding pairs have been recorded: Camargue, France, in 1971, an adult in nuptial plumage was noted in a colony of Sandwich Terns (Isenmann 1972); Banc d'Arguin, France, in 1974-75, one mixed breeding pair, and, from 1976 to 1983, one adult among a colony of Sandwich Terns (Petit 1976; Campredon 1976; Dubois 1983); Ebro delta, Spain, one breeding pair in 1979 (M. Chokomian, *Ardeola* 28: 159), a territorial pair in 1981 (J. Llovera & M. A. Bielsa) and, in 1985, two breeding pairs (Ferrer 1986).

In Europe, in addition to the cases of certain or probable breeding, there are other reports, both coastal (about 14, in Great Britain, France, Italy, and Spain) and inland (Switzerland 1946 and 1977, and Austria 1980 and 1983). The July 1971 record in the Republic of Ireland is still awaiting verification (P. J. Grant *in litt.*).

In Italy, the presence of the species was considered accidental until recently, with only two sightings, both in the nineteenth century, in Sicily in 1833 and 1839 (Moltoni & Brichetti 1978). Since 1982, however, observations have become more frequent in the Northern Tyrrhenian Sea, in the Adriatic and in eastern Sicily. A pair incubated one egg in Valli di Comacchio in June 1985 (plates 137 & 138) and again in May 1986.

### **Migration and wintering**

The migratory routes and wintering zones of the Mediterranean population were little known until recently. The autumn migration (August to October) occurs along the North African coast (Libya to Morocco) in an east-west

**137.** Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis* with Sandwich Terns *S. sandvicensis*, Italy, June 1985  
(P. Brichetti)



[The inclusion of plates 137 & 138 in colour has been subsidised by ZEISS West Germany]



direction towards the Strait of Gibraltar. Jacob (1983) observed a regular spring migration of adults (early May to mid June) along the Algerian coast in an easterly direction, reversing to west in the autumn (mid September to October), when presumed family groups of two to four individuals are recorded. Subsequently, movements occur along the Atlantic coasts in a southerly direction towards the wintering sites in Senegal and The Gambia, peaking between November and mid April (Cramp 1985).

Recent and repeated winter observations in Nigeria, in January 1982, both at the mouth of and along the last 10km of the Niger river, denote the existence of wintering zones farther south than earlier believed (Frugis in Brichetti & Foschi 1985). As well as frequent summering Lesser Crested Terns, a few wintering ones are occasionally observed on the Mediterranean coasts of Morocco and Libya.

### Identification

In addition to the problems of identification discussed by Grant (1984) and the morphological characteristics reported by Cramp (1985), our findings indicate that the combination of the colour and shape of the bill and the grey tail and rump exclude the possibility of confusion with other species, including Sandwich Tern with an anomalous bill colour. Other distinguishing characteristics include the white area between the base of the bill and the lower margin of the crown, this white area being larger and less pointed than that of Sandwich Tern.

In the field, dimensions appear almost identical to those of Sandwich Tern. The flight action resembles that of a small tern, and the dark edges of

138. Two Lesser Crested Terns *Sterna bengalensis* with Sandwich Terns *S. sandvicensis*, Italy, June 1985 (P. Brichetti)



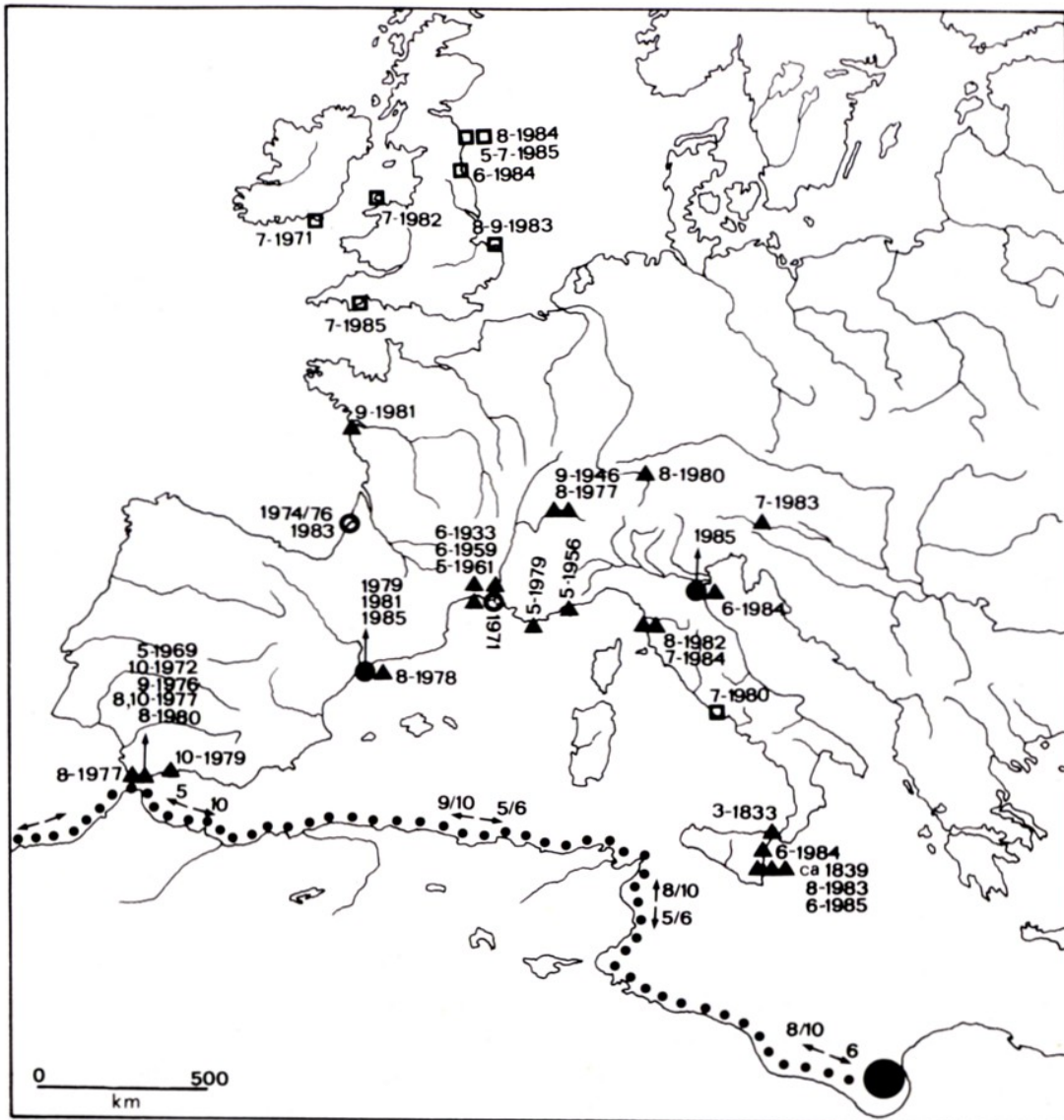


Fig. 1. Status of Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis* in the Western Mediterranean and in Europe. *Large dot* breeding colony; *small dots* single breeding pairs; *circle* confirmed or presumed mixed pairs Lesser Crested Tern-Sandwich Tern *S. sandvicensis*; *triangles* accepted records; *squares* records still under consideration; *dotted line* regular migration route, with numbers indicating main passage months.

the first four or five outer primaries are evident. The voice is less harsh than that of Sandwich Tern.

The identification of this species is covered more fully in the paper by S. J. M. Gantlett, illustrated by Alan Harris (*Brit. Birds* 80: 257-276).

### Acknowledgments

We should like to thank P. J. Grant for his help and for information concerning claims of Lesser Crested Tern in the British Isles; and also S. Frugis, C. Iapichino, P. Isenmann, R. Pardo Gutierrez and G. Tsunis for supplying useful information.

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