

FIRST CONFIRMED OCCURRENCE OF BRIDLED TERN *ONYCHOPRION ANAETHETUS* AND SANDWICH TERN *THALASSEUS SANDVICENSIS* IN IRAQ

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ABSTRACT

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Bridled Tern *Onychoprion anaethetus* and Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis* are strictly maritime species exhibiting a vast distribution range worldwide. In the 1920s, Bridled Terns were recorded in several localities within the Iraq-Iran geopolitical disputed areas in the Arabian (Persian) Gulf; however, there are no existing records of Sandwich Terns in Iraq. Through recent field observations, we confirm the occurrence of Bridled and Sandwich Terns in the Al-Faw Peninsula, Basra Province, on the northern edge of the Arabian Gulf in extreme southeast Iraq. The status of both species in Iraq is still enigmatic and requires further investigation.

Key words: Al-Faw Peninsula, Bridled Tern, coastal wetlands, maritime birds, Sandwich Tern, Southern Iraq

INTRODUCTION

Bridled Terns *Onychoprion anaethetus* are confined to the tropical and subtropical oceans. This species breeds on the Pacific and Atlantic coasts of Central America, including the Caribbean; in small areas of western Africa; around Arabia and eastern Africa down to South Africa; off the coast of India; and in much of south-east Asia and Australasia, excluding southern Australia and New Zealand (Gochfeld *et al.* 2018). In the Arabian (Persian) Gulf, the subspecies of Bridled Tern is *O. a. antarcticus*, which also occurs in the Red Sea and Indian subcontinent, then south to the Seychelles,

Aldabra, Madagascar, Mascarenes, and Maldives (Gochfeld *et al.* 2018). Bridled Terns visit Arabia in the summer to breed and have been recorded breeding along the coasts of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and Iran (Birdlife International 2018a). Most populations are migratory and dispersive, abandoning their breeding grounds at the end of the breeding season to overwinter at sea (Higgins & Davies 1996, Haney *et al.* 1999). In winter, few remain in southeast and east Arabia, where they are mainly pelagic (Porter *et al.* 1996).

Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis* is a widespread maritime species found in Europe, Africa, western Asia, and in the Americas. It breeds on the coast of much of Europe and east to the Caspian Sea, wintering from the Caspian, Black, and Mediterranean Seas to the coasts of western and southern Africa; and from the south Red Sea to north-west India and Sri Lanka. Sandwich Terns are migratory, undergoing post-breeding dispersive movements north and south to favored foraging grounds before migrating southward (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996). This species is a passage migrant, overwintering on most coasts of Arabia and Iran and overwintering in the Arabian Gulf and Oman (Porter *et al.* 1996).

The Al-Faw (Fao) Peninsula is a significant complex of inland and coastal landscapes situated in southern Iraq at the head of the Arabian Gulf. It comprises a triangular geographical area extending from Sihan to the northeast, the Rass Al-Besha and Al-Fao tongue to the southeast, and Um Qasir and Khour Al-Zubair to the southwest. The eastern part of the Al-Faw Peninsula is bordered by the Shatt Al-Arab River, which forms the geopolitical border with Iran (Fig. 1). The Al-Faw Peninsula seems important for migrating and congregating shorebirds, especially gulls and terns (Al-Sheikhly & Al-Barazangy 2015). It is the only region in Iraq that hosts large communities of marine birds such as Sterninae terns.

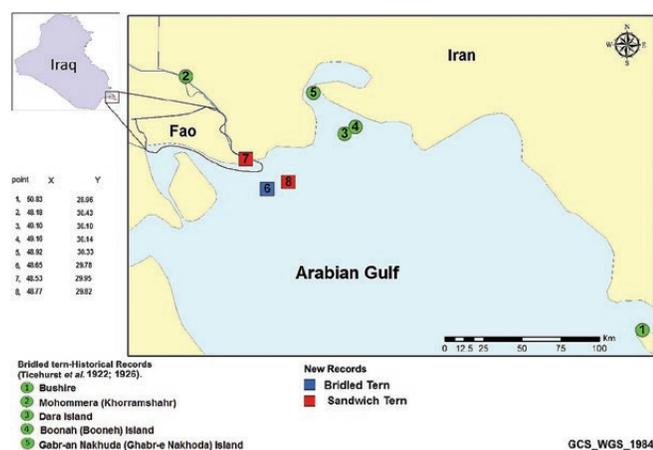


Fig. 1. Map of Southern Iraq, showing with latitude and longitude: Al-Faw (Fao) Peninsula with Bridled Tern historical records (1–5: green sites) and new record (6: blue site); and Sandwich Tern new records (7–8: red sites).

OBSERVATIONS

Bridled Terns

The inclusion of Bridled Tern in the Iraqi avifauna was probably overlooked because of the historical Iraq-Iran geopolitical conflict during the 1920s. Bridled Terns were reported in several localities situated within the previous geographical dominion claimed by Iraq, which explains their inclusion in the literature. Ticehurst *et al.* (1922) mentioned that Bridled Terns (known as Lesser Sooty Terns *Sterna anathetus*) breed on Allah off Tungistan, east of Bushire (Bushehr), in June and July. Zarundy (1911) also reported seeing two skins of Bridled Tern at the mouth of the Karun River at Mohommara (Khorramshahr). Additional notes on breeding of this species were made during 1920–1923 on three coastal islands—Dara, Boonah (Booneh), and Gabr-an Nakhoda (Ghabr-e Nakhoda)—situated in Khour Mosa to the northeast of Fao at the head of the Arabian Gulf (Ticehurst *et al.* 1926, Allouse 1953). After 1925, the geographical territory of Bushire, Khorramshahr, and the three coastal islands, became officially under sovereignty of the Bushehr and Khuzestan provinces in southwestern Iran (Barthold 1984, Entessar 1993) (Fig.1). Therefore, Salim *et al.* (2012) gave Bridled Tern uncertain status, referring to Allouse (1960, 1961, 1962), and indicated that no recent records of this species had been made. No confirmed record of this species within the territory of Iraq has been made since the 1920s.

On 27 June 2014, an adult Bridled Tern in summer plumage was observed *c.* 5–6 km to the south of the Al-Faw Peninsula within the territorial waters of Iraq. It was closely and continuously observed for 20–30 min from a boat *c.* 40–50 m away. The tern was constantly foraging and perching on a floating wooden platform, accompanying an adult individual Greater Crested (Swift) Tern *Thalasseus bergii* (Figs. 2 a, b). The medium-size Bridled Tern had grayish-brown upperparts; narrow wings; a long tail; a rather small head with black cap and a narrow, white, sharply-pointed forehead patch extending behind the eyes as a narrow supercilium; and a bold black loreal stripe contrasting with pale grey hindneck-collar and grey mantle. In flight, it had whitish underparts and underwing coverts contrasting with a dark grey tail and flight feathers. The Greater Crested Tern was larger in size, with notably dark upperparts and primaries, and a long, drooping, waxy, greenish-yellow thick bill (Figs. 2 a, e). Both terns were photographed using a Canon EOS 650D attached to a 100 × 400mm Canon zoom lens. Lesser Crested Tern *Thalasseus bengalensis* (Fig. 2d), Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nolutica*, Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia*, and Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* were also recorded.

The observed Bridled Tern possibly originated from nearby breeding colonies at the head of the Arabian Gulf, arriving in March and staying until late October, with breeding occurring in May/June–August (Jennings 2010, Kavanagh *et al.* 2017). Bridled Tern was the most abundant breeding species (62 000–82 000 pairs) in six active breeding colonies distributed throughout the north Arabian Gulf in late March to the end of August in 2011–2012. The highest number of Bridled Tern nests estimated in May 2011 at Dara and Ghabr-e Nakhoda islands was 250 and 900 nests, respectively (Tayefeh *et al.* 2013). In addition, the maximum estimated breeding population of Bridled Terns at four islands (Ghabre Nakhoda, Nedelghar, Dara, and Boneh) in Kore Mosa in the Arabian Gulf was 1 310 pairs during 2003–2012 (Behrouzi-Rad 2014). The status of Bridled Tern in Iraq is still unknown. Based on the breeding time

of the Arabian Gulf population (Jennings 2010), Bridled Terns are possibly breeding summer visitors to the marine islets of the Iraqi coastal habitats, just as they are elsewhere in the region.

Sandwich Terns

There is no confirmed record of this species in Iraq; it is not mentioned in the Iraqi avifauna (Porter *et al.* 2010, Salim *et al.* 2012). However, we made two recent observations of this species. On 27 June 2014, three adult Sandwich Terns in winter plumage were observed flying *c.* 10 km to the south of the Al-Faw Peninsula within the territorial waters of Iraq. They were carefully observed and photographed continuously from a boat *c.* 30 m away for 10 min until they disappeared from sight. The birds showed a long and slim jizz with pale-grey upperparts, white underparts, and a broad white trailing edge giving a “whitish” impression. They had a white forehead and crown (as the species does from June onwards; Mullarney *et al.* 1999), with a dark mask and a long, slim, black bill tipped with pale yellow. In flight, they had distinctively long and narrow dark-tipped wings, forceful wingbeats, and advanced moult with old P9–P10 (Fig. 2c). Another observation of two adult individuals in winter plumage was made offshore of the Al-Faw Peninsula on 15 May 2015.

The observed Sandwich Terns were possibly among those moving from the Caspian Sea, which are believed to winter well offshore in the Arabian Gulf (Harrison 1985). Sandwich Terns are a scarce winter visitor to the coast in Saudi Arabia from November to February, but scattered individuals, thought to be immature birds,



Fig. 2. (A, B) Bridled Tern with Greater Crested Tern, and (C) Sandwich Tern (bird in center is magnified for close morphological assessment): Al-Faw Peninsula, Basra, Southern Iraq, 27 June 2014; (D) Lesser Crested Tern: Al-Faw Peninsula, Basra, Southern Iraq, 29 June 2014; (E) Greater Crested Tern: Al-Faw Peninsula, Basra, Southern Iraq, 15 May 2015. (Photos A–D © Al-Dirawi; Photo E © Al-Barazengy).

have been recorded in April, June, and July (Bundy *et al.* 1989). There is one breeding record from the gulf coast of Saudi Arabia (Symens 1991). Sandwich Terns are common in United Arab Emirates throughout the year, where many congregate in small flocks and often spend their first summer inshore from May to early September, although breeding has never been recorded (Richardson 1990). This species is also found on the coasts of Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and Iran (Birdlife International 2018b). The closest known breeding grounds are along the southern and eastern shores of the Caspian Sea, along the northern coastline of the Black Sea, and in the Syrian inlands (Harrison 1985, Symes *et al.* 2015). However, the status of Sandwich Tern in Iraq is not fully known; we suggest that it is probably a regular winter visitor and passage migrant to the coastal habitats in extreme southern Iraq.

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