FROM COAST TO DESERT: FIRST INLAND RECORD OF THE SOOTY GULL *ICHTHYAETUS HEMPRICHII* IN SAUDI ARABIA

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ABSTRACT

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On 22 March 2026, a Sooty Gull *Ichthyaetus hemprichii*, a species normally found in coastal regions of the Red Sea, Arabian Gulf, and western Indian Ocean, was recorded at the Sudair wetlands within the King Abdulaziz Royal Reserve in Saudi Arabia. This site is an inland treated wastewater pond area located at 662 m above sea level. This observation is the first confirmed inland record of the species in Saudi Arabia and the first record within the reserve. The finding extends the known distribution of the species and suggests that occasional inland movements may occur. It highlights the importance of inland protected areas for documenting unusual bird occurrences and improving our understanding of bird distribution in the Arabian region.

Key words: Arabian Peninsula, avifauna, diversity, King Abdulaziz Royal Reserve, migration, wetlands

RÉSUMÉ

Le 22 mars 2026, un Goéland de Hemprich *Ichthyaetus hemprichii,* une espèce généralement observée dans les régions côtières de la mer Rouge, du golfe Arabo-Persique et de l'ouest de l'océan Indien, a été signalé dans les zones humides de Sudair, au sein de la réserve royale du roi Abdulaziz, en Arabie saoudite. Ce site correspond à des bassins intérieurs d'eaux usées traitées situés à 662 m d'altitude. Cette observation constitue la première mention confirmée de l'espèce à l'intérieur des terres en Arabie saoudite, ainsi que la première au sein de cette réserve. Cette découverte élargit l'aire de répartition connue de l'espèce et suggère que des déplacements occasionnels vers l'intérieur des terres peuvent se produire. Elle souligne également l'importance des aires protégées intérieures pour documenter des observations ornithologiques inhabituelles et améliorer la compréhension de la distribution des oiseaux dans la région arabique.

Mots-clés: Péninsule Arabique, avifaune, diversité, réserve royale du roi Abdulaziz, migration, zones humides

OBSERVATIONS

During a bird survey conducted on 22 March 2026 at the Sudair wetlands (wastewater treatment ponds within the industrial area; 25°38′47.90″N, 45°45′56.31″E; 662 m elevation; Fig. 1), a Sooty Gull *Ichthyaetus hemprichii* was observed. The species was confidently identified based on its medium size, dark plumage, sooty-brown coloration, and contrasting white eye crescents (Fig. 2). This species is strongly associated with coastal and nearshore ocean environments, particularly coral islands and sandy shores (Burger et al., 2020; Cramp & Simmons, 1983; del Hoyo et al., 1996; Urban et al., 1986).

In Saudi Arabia, this species is an uncommon resident breeder, with breeding largely restricted to undisturbed offshore islands in the Red Sea, while foraging in adjacent coastal waters. To date, no inland occurrences have been documented (El Ghamdi et al., 2020), making this record from the Sudair wetlands the first documented inland occurrence of the species in Saudi Arabia. Globally, it is distributed along the coasts of the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, and southern Arabian Gulf, as well as the coasts of Pakistan and from eastern South Africa to Kenya. It is regarded as a near-endemic species of the northwestern Indian Ocean, reflecting its strong ecological association with marine and coastal environments (BirdLife International, 2018; Burger et al., 2020).

This gull is considered a partial migrant, with most populations undergoing post-breeding dispersal between September and November, although some populations remain resident year-round in the Red Sea region (del Hoyo et al., 1996; Olsen & Larsson, 2003; Urban et al., 1986). Breeding occurs between April and October, typically in small, loose colonies on coastal or inshore islands, but solitary nesting also occurs occasionally (del Hoyo et al., 1996; Urban et al., 1986). The species is rarely recorded inland or in freshwater environments (Cramp & Simmons, 1983; del Hoyo et al., 1996; Urban et al., 1986). Its diet consists mainly of dead fish and fishery discards, but it may also opportunistically prey on seabird eggs and chicks, as well as turtle hatchlings, making it an important local predator within breeding colonies (del Hoyo et al., 1996; Gallagher et al., 1984; Urban et al., 1986).

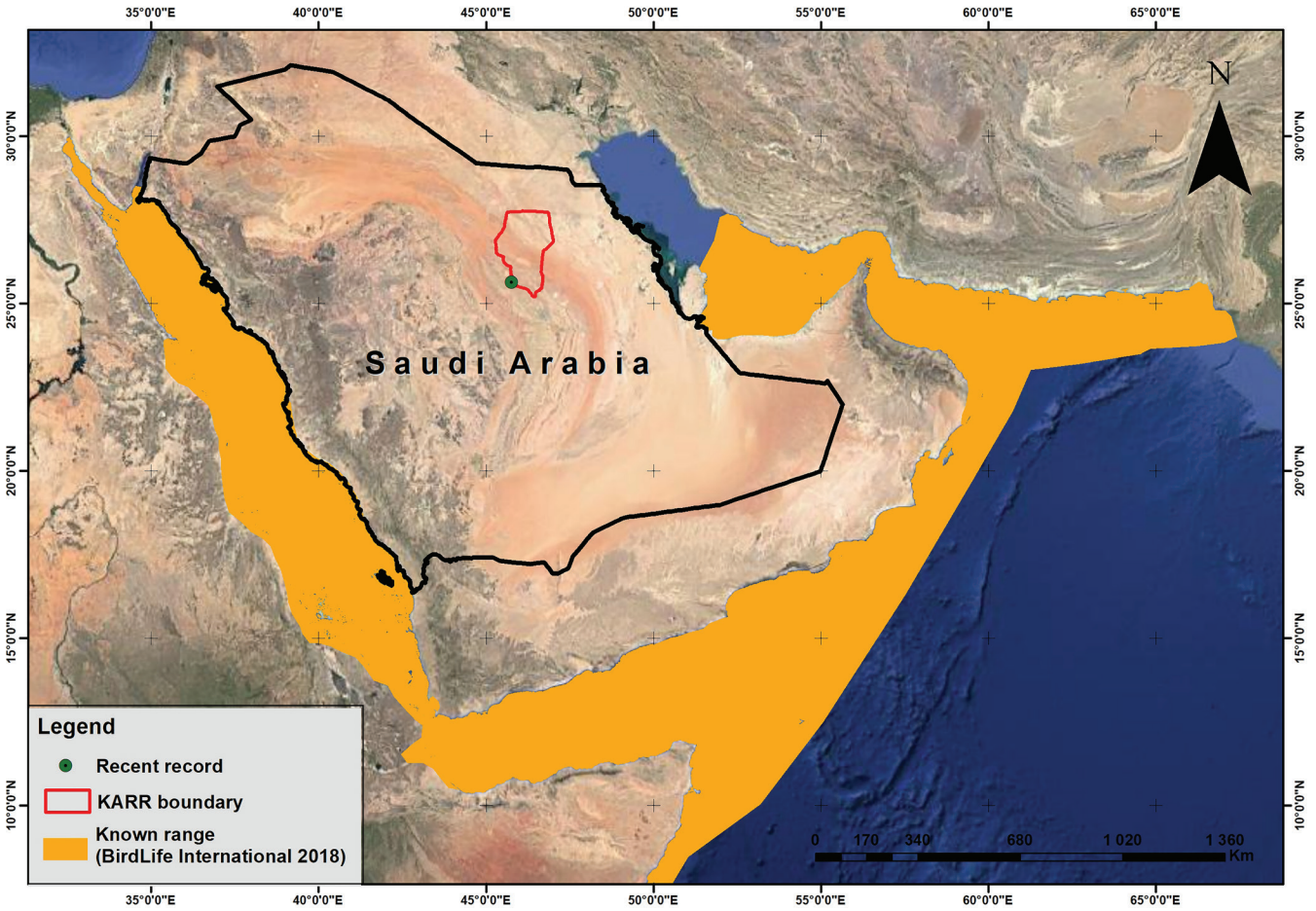


Fig. 1. Location of Sooty Gull *Ichthyaetus hemprichii* sightings in Saudi Arabia.

Although the species is currently classified as Least Concern (LC), its global population appears to be decreasing (Boland & Burwell, 2020; Calabrese et al., 2024; Symes et al., 2015). The presence of this individual at Sudair may reflect opportunistic foraging driven by the availability of anthropogenic food resources in artificial habitats such as wastewater treatment ponds. Alternatively, its presence may represent dispersal beyond its typical coastal ranges, underscoring the importance of documenting such atypical



Fig. 2. Sooty Gull *Ichthyaetus hemprichii* at Sudair wetland, Riyadh, King Abdulaziz Royal Reserve, Saudi Arabia, on 22 March 2026: (A) at rest; (B) in flight.

occurrences to improve our understanding of this species' ecology and distribution.

The King Abdulaziz Royal Reserve (KARR), which encompasses a wide range of ecosystems and diverse terrain, constitutes a critical area for regional biodiversity, notably avifauna, due to its strategic position along a major migratory flyway between Africa and Asia. Consequently, the reserve may be considered a key bird biodiversity hotspot in Saudi Arabia (Al-Qahtani et al., 2025). Its ecological importance is further supported by several recent noteworthy ornithological records and breeding events within the area, including the occurrence of the Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos* (Al-Qahtani et al., 2025); the breeding range expansion of the Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus* (Altalhi et al., 2025); the first evidence of breeding and eastward range expansion of the Mediterranean Short-toed Lark *Alaudala rufescens* (Al-Asmari et al., 2025a); the first confirmed nesting of the Egyptian Nightjar *Caprimulgus aegyptius* (Chedad et al., 2026a); the first record of Rüppell's Vulture *Gyps rueppelli* (Al-Asmari et al., 2025b); the first records of nine vagrant bird species, including raptors, landbirds, and waterbirds (Chedad et al., 2026b); and the first confirmed record of the Red Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicarius* (Chedad et al., 2026c).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that no competing interests exist.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Observations: AC, AMA, HAA and NMA. Writing—original draft: AC and AFA. Writing—review & editing: AC, AFA, ASA and HHA. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript. Resources were provided by ASA, HHA, and AMA.

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