

The Black Tern

Chlidonias nigra (L)

in South West Africa

by
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I. ABSTRACT

The occurrence of the Black Tern in South West Africa is documented, with a review of earlier records. Field identification is easier than current South African field guides suggest, which may have caused the species to be frequently overlooked. Notes on the biology of the species in South West Africa are given, including observations of commensal fishing with grebes.

II. INTRODUCTION

During late 1968 a number of small terns were observed by one of us (R.J.) at the Walvis Bay sewage ponds. They differed from accompanying White-winged Black Terns *Chlidonias leucoptera*, but were also clearly not Whiskered Terns *C. hybrida*. These birds were provisionally identified as Black Terns in non-breeding plumage, but efforts to collect specimens failed. Varying numbers were, however, seen on most visits to the ponds up to May 1969, when the Black Terns were still in non-breeding dress whereas the few remaining White-winged Black Terns all wore at least partial breeding plumage.

In late 1969 Black Terns were observed at Sandwich Harbour and four specimens were collected by H.B. in April 1970. Measurements and moult details appear in the table. One specimen (♀) was sent to the British Museum (Natural History) for confirmation. It was identified as "almost certainly" of the European race *Chlidonias nigra nigra* (L.), which would be expected on geographical grounds (Mrs. B.P. Hall, pers. comm.). This and two other specimens were deposited respectively at the State Museum, Windhoek; the Transvaal Museum, Pretoria; and the South African Museum in Cape Town. The remaining specimen has been retained in our Departmental collection. Mr. H. von Schwind has since drawn our attention to the existence of an earlier specimen in the collection of the State Museum, Windhoek (see below). The above appear to be the only southern African specimens currently extant in southern African museums.

III. EARLIER RECORDS

Although not accepted on the South African list prior to 1970 (McLachlan and Liversidge 1957, Clancey 1965-66, Winterbottom 1969), several earlier records of *C. nigra* in South West Africa exist. Bierman and Voous (1950) recorded the Black Tern visually off the south-western coast, while Sauer and Sauer (1960) observed numbers in northern South West Africa and even succeeded in mist-netting and ringing several. As far as we are aware, the first southern African specimens of *Chlidonias nigra* were collected in 1965 by visiting German

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ornithologists P. Becker and J. Pilaski (Pilaski 1967; Becker, unpubl. ms.) in the area of Swakopmund and Walvis Bay. One specimen was deposited with the Landesmuseum Hannover (Germany), while the other is at the State Museum, Windhoek. Mr. von Schwind (pers. comm.) informs us that he and several other local and visiting ornithologists have seen the species occasionally on the coast, the numbers seemingly fluctuating from year to year.

IV. STATUS IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

The Black Tern may well be commoner in the sub-continent than presently thought, since it is barely mentioned in South African literature and can be overlooked as the common *C. leucoptera*. In support of this possibility we mention a most interesting note by Bromley (1952) describing lake terns at Welkom, O.F.S.. Bromley distinguished two kinds, the second of which had "duskier grey upper wings and (a) rather dusky grey tail" as compared to the first (*C. leucoptera*). Furthermore, their call-notes differed slightly. Bromley first considered that they were Whiskered Terns *C. hybrida*, but discounted this possibility since all the terns which subsequently were seen in breeding plumage, were *C. leucoptera*. It seems more likely, however, that the second kind of tern was in fact *C. nigra*, which resembles *C. leucoptera* far more closely than does *C. hybrida*, and the description as well as the lack of breeding plumage in late autumn and winter parallel our own observations closely.

Pilaski (1967) has suggested that the development of the fishing industry along the coast may have directly influenced the appearance of *C. nigra* in South West Africa. Our own observations (see below) seem to show that the Black Tern is not as dependent on the waste products of this industry as Pilaski apparently thought. Nevertheless, his suggestion remains a possibility, since it appears that the Black Tern has become an increasingly common visitor along the South West African coast.

V. FIELD IDENTIFICATION

McLachlan and Liversidge (1970) are altogether too cautious in discounting the possibility of field distinction between *C. hybrida*, *leucoptera* and *nigra* in winter plumage. Peterson, Mountfort and Hollom (Revised Edition, 1966) give a quite adequate treatment of diagnostic field characters in these species, both illustrations and text. In brief, the best distinction between non-breeding *C. leucoptera* and *C. nigra* is the dark shoulder smudge on the flank of the latter. Other differences readily become apparent when the birds are observed carefully in mixed groups: *C. nigra* has a darker grey, more uniform

dorsum with strongly contrasting white collar, the cap is neater, the bird is slimmer, the tail fork slightly more pronounced and the bill less stubby than in *C. leucoptera*.

VI. BIOLOGY

The Black Tern seems to occur in small flocks along the West coast. It is frequently found in company with White-winged Black, Whiskered, Arctic *Sterna macrura* and Common *S. hirundo* Terns (Pilaski 1967; Becker, unpubl. ms.; pers. obs.). We have observed *C. nigra* mainly along sandy beaches near lagoons, and at the lagoons themselves as at Sandwich Harbour and Walvis Bay; also at sewage ponds at Walvis Bay and Swakopmund, and on the semi-fresh pools at Sandwich Harbour.

The feeding actions and flight of *C. leucoptera* and *C. nigra* seem to be identical. The Black Tern has, however, also been observed to pick at and presumably eat fish scales cleaned off by fishermen along the beach, while Pilaski (1967) recorded it feeding on effluent from local fish factories. We have also observed Black Terns fishing commensally with Black-necked Grebes *Podiceps nigricollis* in Sandwich Lagoon. The terns wheeled about, screaming, over the flock of grebes which appeared to be catching small fish with short dives near the surface. The terns would dip down continually to the water around and in amongst the grebes, although it was impossible to see what they were catching. The whole performance lasted, in two instances, for about 35 and 15 minutes respectively, during which time the terns followed the grebe flock for up to 200 metres along the lagoon shore. On these occasions we have heard them call, the sound being much as described by Bromley (*loc. cit.*).

VII. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Mrs. B.P. Hall and Mr. D. Goodwin of the British Museum (Natural History) for checking a specimen for us, and Mr. H. von Schwind of the S.W.A. Scientific Society for generous and valuable discussion and assistance with the literature and local records.

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Table 1. Measurements of *Chlidonias nigra* (mm).

Specimen No.	Length	Culmen	Tarsus	Tail	Wings		Total Body Weight (g)	Rectal Temperature (°C)
					Left	Right		
1 ♂	234 (9 ¹ / ₄ ins)	25,5	17,0	69,5	183	182	51	41,7
2 ♀	239 (9 ¹ / ₂ ins)	26,0	17,5	71,0	191	190	52	37,1*
3 ♀	240 (9 ¹ / ₂ ins)	26,0	16,0	70,5	189	190	59	41,4
4 ♀	240 (9 ¹ / ₂ ins)	26,5	16,5	73,0	220	200	58	40,5*

* Birds wounded during collection and killed in the hand before temperature was taken.

Table 2. Wind and tail moult of *Chlidonias nigra* **

Specimen No.	Primary Wing Feathers			Tail Feathers	
	Number Present	Moult of Number(s):		Number of Pairs Present	Moult of Pair Number:
		Left	Right		
1	10	6 and 7	6 and 7	6	1
2	10	4	4	6	No moult
3	10	6 and 7	6 and 7	6	1
4	10	6 and 7	5 and 6	6	No moult

** All specimens were in winter plumage.

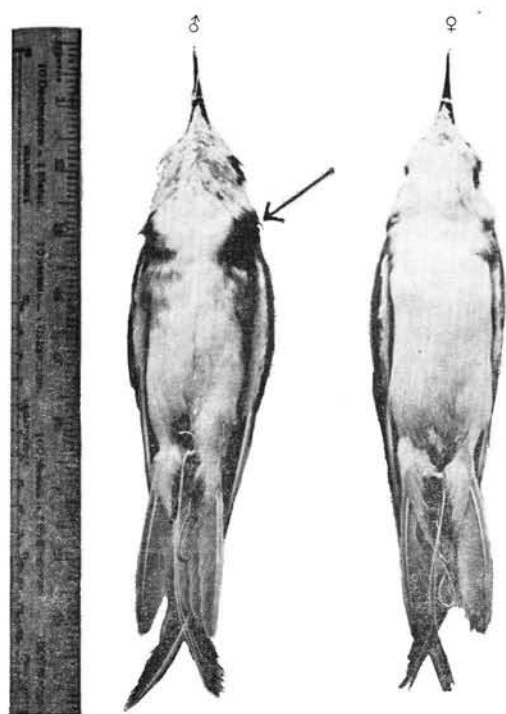


Plate 1. *Chlidonias nigra* (winter plumage) Ventral.

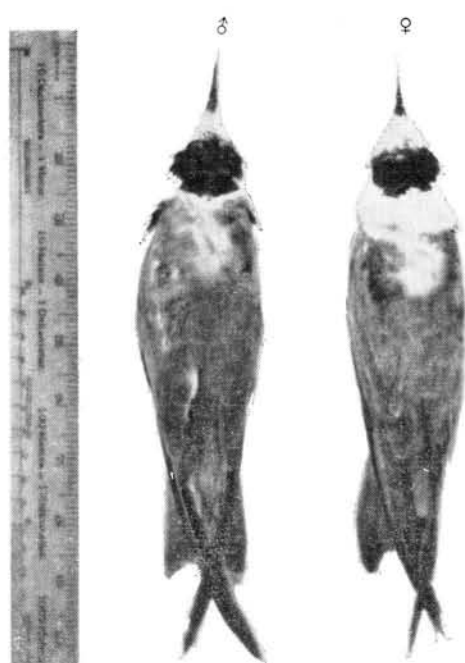


Plate 2. *Chlidonias nigra* (winter plumage) Dorsal.

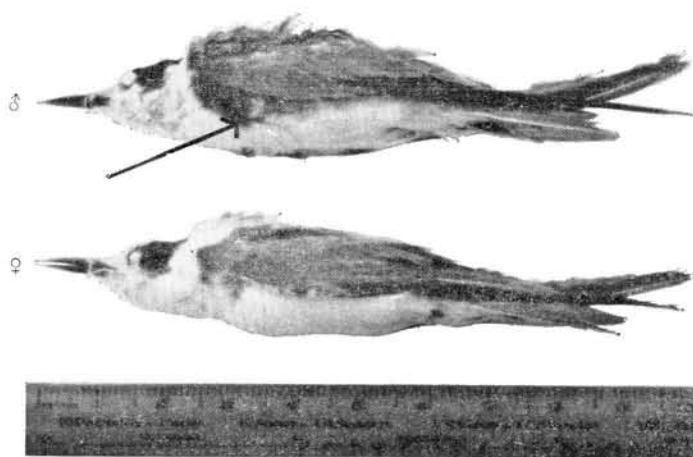


Plate 3. *Chlidonias nigra* (winter plumage) Lateral.