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Editorial

The symposium and dinner to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Namibia Bird Club have come and gone. I am very pleased to be able to say that our members attended these events in numbers and that we had over seventy people there (including the invited speakers). The symposium went off without any real problems – none of the speakers overran his allotted time slot and on the technological front the laptops and the beamers communicated with each other.

There will be a special edition of *Lanioturdus* incorporating the papers presented so I will not go into detail here. Suffice to say that all the talks were at layman's level, all the feedback we have had has been positive and that we have had a number of people enquiring when we will be presenting another symposium – the answer to that one is simple – not before we have again accumulated sufficient funds.

Many people were able to obtain the software necessary to commence atlasing thanks to Arnold van der Westhuizen's efforts. SABAP2

Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus* drowns Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis*

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All photographs in this article are by Jessica Kemper

On the morning of 18 February 2011, I observed a multi-species feeding flock at Second Lagoon (26°41'S 15°08'E) near the southern Namibian coastal town of Lüderitz. The flock, composed of several hundreds of Cape Cormorants *Phalacrocorax capensis*, dozens of Hartlaub's Gulls *Larus hartlaubii* and Swift Terns *Sterna bergii*, as well as some White-breasted Cormorants *P. lucidus*, Kelp Gulls *L. dominicanus* and Sandwich Terns *S. sandvicensis*, was feeding on a shoal of small fish and the birds were herding it towards the southern edge of the lagoon.

While watching this large flock, I noticed a smaller group of birds, composed of 24 Hartlaub's Gulls, two Kelp Gulls, 31 Swift Terns and two Sandwich Terns approximately 300 m north of the main flock and at a distance of about 400 m from me. The group was hovering above an adult Kelp Gull sitting on the water that was seemingly attempting to control a large fish. However, a closer look revealed that the Kelp Gull was in fact attacking a Sandwich Tern, gripping its head and/or neck with its beak and forcing the struggling tern's head under water.



Occasionally the gull adjusted its grip on the tern, which resisted the assault by thrashing its wings. At one point the tern briefly became airborne while still being grasped by the gull, but was quickly subdued and submerged again.



Attempts by the tern to free itself gradually became weaker and the gull then let go of the tern for brief periods. I could not see whether the Kelp Gull, in addition to holding the tern under water, also pecked it on occasion; however, no blood was visible on either tern or gull.



Eight minutes after I had first witnessed the attack, the gull took off from the water, leaving a motionless, apparently dead or dying tern floating on the water surface. The gull never attempted to feed on the tern and no other birds in the vicinity attempted to rob the tern from the gull or feed on it.

Within six seconds of taking off, the gull caught a young skate (probably *Raja* sp. with a disc width of about 10 cm) by shallow-diving and landed on the edge of the lagoon about 50 m from me. There it first rinsed its prey in the shallow water and then swallowed it whole.

Apart from a slightly disheveled appearance around its beak and eyes, the Kelp Gull was in good condition and did not show any signs of injuries sustained during the struggle with the Sandwich Tern.



The incident I witnessed and photographed is particularly unusual because it occurred on the water and the Kelp Gull attempted to drown (rather than peck) the Sandwich Tern. It is unclear what circumstances provoked this prolonged, deliberate and most probably fatal attack. It was presumably not a case of predation.

Kelp Gulls are generalist and opportunistic feeders, and apart from catching their own prey, scavenge on a variety of animals, including birds, and may predate chicks or eggs (Hockey et al. 2005 and references therein, JK pers. obs.). They may also obtain food through intra- and inter-specific kleptoparasitism, i.e. by stealing food from other individuals (Hockey et al. 1989, Steele & Hockey 1995).

Kelp Gulls are also known to kill adult terns and gulls (including conspecifics) on occasion, usually at seabird colonies during the breeding season (Cooper 1977, JK pers. obs.).

It is possible that the attack I witnessed started as a squabble over a prey item; however, kleptoparasitic attacks are usually not deliberately fatal. It is also doubtful that the skate, picked up by the gull shortly after the attack, was the prey item in question. Apart from being very large and therefore unlikely to have been selected by the Sandwich Tern, another Kelp Gull or other large bird such as a White-breasted Cormorant would have probably spotted and taken it during the skirmish.

Given that competition for food or nesting space was therefore not likely to be the reason for this fatal incident, it is difficult to understand what advantage the Kelp Gull gained from killing a Sandwich Tern at sea, or indeed what evolutionary significance could be attached to this event. Or was it perhaps just a once-off incident after all, involving a particularly aggressive Kelp Gull and an unlucky Sandwich Tern that happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time?

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