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# Pattern of occurrence of different populations of Sandwich Tern along the Namibian coast

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## Introduction

The Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis* is a fairly common austral summer visitor along the coasts of southern Africa from Namibia to southern Mozambique, tending to concentrate along selected stretches of coastline. The large majority come from the west European seaboard and the Baltic Sea with occasional birds from the Mediterranean, Black and Caspian seas (Underhill *et al* 1999, Tree 2011, SAFRING databank). That part of the European population spending the off-season in southern Africa either passes by or remains along the central Namibian coastline where mid-summer figures may be in the order of <1 000-5 400 birds (Tree 2011). The southern African population has been roughly estimated at 10 000 to 30 000 birds (Underhill *et al* 1999), this subsequently adjusted to <10 000 to 15 000 dependent on the year (Tree 2011). The number of terns 'summering' along the Namibian coast varies considerably from year to year and is determined by the amount of suitable prey which, in turn, is governed by a complex pattern of annual oceanic events. The factors governing the availability of prey are beyond the scope of this short paper. Adult birds start to arrive by late August and have all departed by early April leaving only very small numbers of immatures to over-winter.

The great attraction in Namibia for the two commonest tern species, Common *Sterna hirundo* and Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*, is the huge concentrations of krill, euphausiids,

and shrimp (eg. Barange & Boyd 1992, Tree 1999, v d Winden 2003, pers. obs). For instance, along the central Namibian coastline in late January 1998 tern numbers were estimated at 180 000 Common and 30 000-35 000 Black Tern (Tree 1998) but in the same period in 1999 numbers were much lower with probably no more than 30 000-50 000 Common and 5 000 Black Tern (Tree 1999) with numbers dropping off rapidly after our arrival. Although the Sandwich Tern does not appear to normally feed on krill, but rather on small fish, they have been observed taking shrimp at Walvis Bay during a sulphur eruption but generally they do appear to occur in larger numbers in years of abundant krill/shrimp. Late summer 1998 was the end of a krill event but there were no indications of a repeat in the same period in 1999 although there may have been a small one earlier in the season. It is virtually impossible to gauge the effects of annual oceanic conditions to the north of our region on the numbers visiting us in any one year.

## Methods

Foreign ringed birds are recorded in three ways: firstly by the finding of dead birds wearing rings; secondly by the capture of ringed birds during ringing operations and thirdly by the reading of rings in the field with the aid of a 20-60x telescope. This latter method has been immensely facilitated by the more recent use of engraved (alphanumeric) rings of different colours as well as the printing of more field readable metal rings in Denmark, Germany (Helgoland), Poland and The

Netherlands. That this does give a bias to records from Germany, Scotland, Netherlands, France and Italy cannot be disputed but they do fit into the picture already obtained from ringing studies. As the readable metal rings from Poland are very recent they have not had much influence on sightings as yet. Reference is also made to observations made to the south of Namibia (Tree 2011).

### Results

Table 1 shows all known recoveries/controls up till the end of 2013 from each of the countries of origin and the month in which they occurred. These also include records

of birds initially handled and ringed in Namibia, under the month of handling, and subsequently found back at, or in the vicinity of, their breeding colonies. Some of these are multiple recoveries in different years with only one record from each year being used in this analysis, either back in Europe or in Namibia. In much the same way Table 2 shows all known recoveries/controls of birds in their first year of life. Only a small proportion of young birds visit southern Africa in their first year of life and many of these only arrive late in the season, this varying with country of origin (Tree 2011).

**Table 1: Origins and month of finding of all ages of European ringed Sandwich Tern in Namibia (up to 31 December 2013).**

	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Belgium					2	1		2	5			
Britain		1	2	5	9	10	7	13	13	9	4	
Denmark					5	9	4	4	7	6		1
Estonia					1				2	1		
France				2	1	7	2	1	2		2	
Germany (Helgoland)					1		2	8	11	1	2	
Germany (Hiddensee)					1				1	1		
Ireland					4	5	3	5	9			2
Italy					3	1	6	2	1		1	
Netherlands				4	10	12	6	12	16	3		
Poland					1		1					
Spain					1				1	1	1	
Sweden					1	2						
Turkmenistan								1				

Ringing effort in Namibia is very variable as this is not a tern caught in any numbers (345 to date) and there appears to be a strong bias to birds being caught in February and March (69%). Whether they are more susceptible to capture through use of tape recordings at this time of year is

not known but there is a considerable influx of more naïve immature birds at this time increasing the overall numbers.

Exact ages of most birds ringed in Europe are known as the vast majority are ringed as pulli at the

breeding colonies with very limited ringing of adults taking place, this latter mainly in Scotland, Sweden, Belgium and Italy.

The recording of ordinary plain colour rings only has not been used in this analysis for two reasons: when multiple rings are used it has frequently been found that the second ring has fallen off therefore one is unsure as to the scheme

involved and secondly it is often very difficult to trace the scheme involved as the researchers often append the colour rings recording only the metal ring number when reporting back to the relevant ringing scheme. Most of those traced have been either from Great Britain or The Netherlands and mention of the latter occurs later in the text.

**Table 2: Origins and month of finding in Namibia of Sandwich Tern in their first year of life (up to 31 December 2013)**

	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Belgium					1	2			
Britain			4	1	6	6	5	4	
Denmark		1	3		1		1		1
Estonia						1			
France					1			1	
Germany (Helgoland)			1	1		2	1		
Germany (Hiddensee)		1					1		
Ireland			3	2	1	2			
Italy		1		3					
Netherlands	2	3	5		4	6	3		
Sweden			1						

**Discussion**

One of the intriguing features of the Sandwich Tern is that while members of any one colony may be basking in the southern sunshine during the austral summer others may still be found frequenting the Atlantic seaboard during the boreal winter (proven from a ringing study in the Ythan estuary in north-east Scotland - E Weston pers. comm.). This huge spread of birds from Britain and Ireland south to the southern and eastern coasts of Africa must be a very important survival strategy for a colony. But which benefit the most – those birds that do not migrate but face the rather unpleasant northern winter weather or those having to fly

thousands of kilometres to a much more equable off-season climate or those that stop off half-way in West Africa? The vast majority of the western population (presently estimated to number 166 000 to 171 000 birds – Tree 2011) is known to spend the boreal winter along the western seaboard from Senegal to Angola. Obviously all birds visiting southern Africa must pass Namibia during their migration as no birds are known to penetrate further south than Tanzania on the east coast and those few that do visit that far south are from the colonies of the Caspian Sea which normally winter in the north-west Indian Ocean or the Mediterranean. That one of these

birds ringed in Turkmenistan did reach Namibia in its fourth year is probably indicative of abmigration in which it may eventually have joined a western colony. This has been proven on one previous occasion when a bird from the Caspian Sea was found in a Danish breeding colony (see Tree 2011). Bearing in mind that the western birds visiting southern Africa must, by necessity, pass by Namibia one can look at the distribution of the records of the different populations. Whether all of these birds stop off in Namibia is uncertain, but likely, as they tend to be short hop migrants, especially on southwards passage and early on during northwards migration (Tree 2011): Namibia has a very long coastline extending from the Kunene mouth south to the Orange (Gariiep) mouth, a distance of roughly 1 400 kilometres, so it is likely that the central Namibian coastal wetlands will play host to the large majority, if not all, of birds visiting southern Africa at some time.

Although the different sub-populations spread out along vast lengths of coastline each appears to have a section in which they tend to concentrate to a greater degree and although we do not have detailed information for Africa north of Namibia there is sufficient evidence to gain an insight into some of the better ringed populations visiting southern Africa. As already mentioned birds-of-the-year tend to be late in reaching our coastline and although small numbers do reach us from October there appears to be an influx in the February/March period with many more only arriving in their second year of life. This was amply shown for Dutch colour-ringed birds in Tree (1999 & 2011) which we repeat here: “A study by Eric Steinen (*pers comm*) led to a large number of young being banded/colour-banded,

with a year and site code, at Griend in the Netherlands from 1995 to 1997. The Namibian sightings in 1998 were 17 (71%) from 1995, 5 (21%) from 1996 and 2 (8%) from 1997, and in 1999 were 21 (52.5%) from 1995, 9 (22.5%) from 1996 and 10 (25%) from 1997”. This shows the increasing incidence of young birds as they grow older especially for birds in their second year.

Considering that there is much interchange between western European populations it is perhaps surprising that the major occurrence on the Namibian coast is of birds from the North Sea where, admittedly, the largest numbers do occur, and encompassing the east coast of England and Scotland, Belgium, The Netherlands, the Waddensea population of Germany, and Denmark, with fewer from the Irish, Baltic, French, Spanish and Italian colonies. Some Danish birds have been proven to cross Europe overland and stage in Italy, one ending up in Namibia. One surprising result shown on Table 1 is that mainly British birds tend to be recorded before November which, to a certain extent, may be the result of many fewer birds being captured at this time as September trapping in St Helena Bay in the Western Cape only showed a slight bias in this direction. Irish birds tend to peak along the south coast of Africa while British birds are still common there but other North Sea birds are much less plentiful. It is likely that the large majority of Baltic birds remain to the north of our sub-region.

Much has yet to be learnt about this otherwise reasonably well-known species on its southern wintering grounds but it is a difficult bird to capture in adequate numbers and appears to respond best to tape-

recordings whilst on migration (especially February and March). Further, suitable trapping sites have yet to be found throughout the season. The use of engraved rings by certain European ringing schemes is making it much easier to identify the origin of birds in the field and a pattern of occurrence is beginning to emerge for some individuals.

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