

Third census of the Damara Tern at Elizabeth Bay,  
South West Africa, December 1978

The Damara Tern *Sterna balaenarum* has previously been recorded breeding at Elizabeth Bay (26 55S, 15 12E) in 1976 and 1977 (Frost & Johnson 1977, Siegfried & Johnson 1977). This note details observations made during 8 - 10 December 1978.

A total of 13 nests, all containing one egg, was found. Another four birds seen on the ground may have been incubating. No young birds were seen. Up to 15 birds were seen and photographed feeding in the bay. Breeding birds were not seen at the previously recorded site among barchan dunes, but two birds were seen flying in the vicinity. Eight birds on the ground, at least four on eggs, were seen among barchan dunes at a new locality. A further eight nests were among gravel humps and one was on a salt pan. Birds were not seen at these sites in previous years. Previous estimates of the colony size were 12 - 15 pairs in 1976 and 20 pairs in 1977 (Frost & Johnson 1977, Siegfried & Johnson 1977). Colony size in 1978 is estimated at 15 - 20 pairs. It would seem that colony size has remained relatively stable over the three years censused.

At one nest site, the incubating bird was exposed to drifting sand due to a strong wind during the evening and night of 8 December. The bird was observed during the evening to adjust its egg several times and it appeared 'disturbed' by the wind blown sand. On the following morning the nest site was visited, and the bird was still sitting. On disturbance the bird flew up and returned to the site four times without settling. Closer inspection showed an absence of nest scrape and egg. The egg was then found buried under *ca.* 10 cm of sand. The egg was cold and contained a well-formed embryo. It would seem that the bird had acted as a windbreak and sand had piled up in front of it. As it stood up to move the egg, the sand had apparently gradually covered the egg. Frost & Johnson (1977) point out the necessity of the Damara Tern nesting in unexposed sites with a sandy substrate - a view confirmed by the above observation.

References

- Frost, P. & Johnson, P. 1977. Seabirds on the Diamond Coast, South West Africa, December 1976. *Cormorant* 2: 3-4.
- Siegfried, W.R. & Johnson, P. 1977. The Damara Tern and other seabirds on the Diamond Coast, South West Africa, December 1977. *Cormorant* 3: 13.

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