

ON THE GULL-BILLED TERNS AT "DE BEER" NEAR HOOK-OF-HOLLAND IN 1949.

BY

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ON May 29th, 1949, A. M. van den Oord and the author found a nest with two eggs of the Gull-billed Tern (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) on the beach of "De Beer" near Hook-of-Holland. On June 19th another nest was found with two nestlings, and a third nest containing two eggs, one of which afterwards disappeared, was found on the 29th. The first and third nests were about 600 yards apart on a beach among low dunes with Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*) breeding in the vicinity. The second nest was farther away from the sea, in the middle of a small sandy plain between low dunes, with Black-headed Gulls (*Larus ridibundus*) and Common Terns breeding near-by. In all cases the scrapes were rather big and deep and practically without lining.

The eggs of the first nest showed a marked difference in form and colour. One was greenish, the other yellow-brown and the dimensions were 49.1 × 36.2 mm. and 50.7 × 34.4 mm. respectively (F. P. J. Kooymans). On June 16th the yellow-brown egg showed cracks and on the 19th we found a young bird, already dry, and the shell still in the nest. The second egg hatched on June 20th. The birds did not remove the shells: the first was thrown out by a movement of the brooding bird and then blown away by the wind, and the second we took home in the evening.

The nestling that hatched on June 19th (out of the darker egg) was dark, the upper-parts being almost evenly brownish-black. The bill was rather heavy and of a pink colour, with a black tip and a white egg-tooth. The legs were orange-yellow. The upper-parts of the second nestling were mouse-grey. The difference in colour between the nestlings is well shown in the upper picture on plate 80.

We saw the brooding bird fed with a small fish by its mate. Three pellets were found; one—about as big as a hazel-nut—consisting of very small pieces of fish-bone and the other two of hairs and bones of mice. Kooymans saw one of the old birds hunting over the Green Beach where it picked up a nestling bird five times to drop it from a height of some metres. He ran towards it and chased off the Gull-billed Tern. The nestling was found to be a few-days-old Avocet (*Recurvirostra avosetta*), which was dead.

We were also able to obtain some data about the food of the young. On June 19th the first, just hatched, stayed under the old bird till about noon, when it began to cheep and creep away, upon which the other adult, then standing near the nest, flew away and came back with a small insect which it gave to the

chick plate 79). The brooding bird had left the nest for a short time, but returned immediately after the young had been fed and went on brooding. Twice again we saw that the chick was given an insect, after which it kept still, under the old bird. On June 21st the larger nestling was fed with a small fish, which the adult brought in its bill. Afterwards the old birds were seen a few times disgorging very small pieces of food which were given to the young.

Particularly after the eggs hatched, the Gull-billed Terns were violently attacked by the Common Terns which were breeding near-by. They reacted by lifting their heads in a defensive manner, uttering an angry "arrrr", opening their bills wide so that the reddish insides showed. They were also often attacked by Common and Little Terns (*Sterna albifrons*) when flying over the beach. Usually they dodged the attacks without defensive movements or sounds, but when a Black-headed Gull came near the nesting-site, they became excited and uttered a loud "cha-hu, cha-hu", and also "huhuhuhu" (u as in duck), the same note as the alarm (to get the right idea of these sounds they should be pronounced very nasally). When taking over at brooding, the incoming bird uttered the loud "cha-hu, cha-hu", sometimes with its bill almost closed, sometimes with an open bill, in which case it was a very harsh and loud sound. The sitting bird made muttering noises, stretched flat on the nest and then in most cases flew off suddenly, at the moment when the other bird was very near.

Although all the eggs hatched in each nest, the young disappeared soon afterwards in every case, so that it seems very probable that they did not live. The Herring-Gulls (*Larus argentatus*), which breed at "De Beer" in some hundreds of pairs, are thought to be responsible for this.

[It is only since the recent war (*cf.* p 357) that the Gull-billed Tern has nested regularly—in very small numbers—in Holland, so that, although the gist of this paper has already been published in *Ardea*, vol. 37, pp. 161-167 (in Dutch), we are glad to print this account of one of the 1949 nests at "De Beer", partly as an accompaniment to the photographs plates 78-80) and partly to supplement the Essex record with a few breeding details.—Eds.]