

Unusual feeding behaviour of Gull-billed Terns

Dhaivat Hathi: A-3, Pratistha Apartment, Shyamal Cross Roads, Ahmedabad 380018. dhaivat.hathi@gmail.com



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On 6 March 2015, I visited a village in the outskirts of Madhavpur, in the Ghed region, approximately 55 kms from Porbandar, along with Manish Kargatiya. The village is around 20 to 25 kms from the sea coast. A flock of around 150 Gull-billed Terns (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) were seen in a dry farm of 'desi chana', also known as chickpea. There was no water nearby and we were surprised to see such a huge flock of these terns and decided to investigate further. We noted that the flock was feeding on green-coloured caterpillars (we could not identify the species) in the farm. They were hunting as if they were hunting over the water. They would fly over the farm and dive to catch the caterpillars exactly as they would dive in the water to catch fish or other aquatic prey. The group would divide in two parts and cover two different farms at a time and again they would get together and hunt at one farm. This same behaviour was seen for almost 4 hours that day, from around 15:30 to 19:30 hrs. We went on the next day to observe this behaviour again, but we did not find a single bird in the area. The farmer who owned the farm told us that that the birds would come again after a couple of days, once there are caterpillars; meanwhile, they go to other farms in the surrounding areas.

The Gull-billed Tern is said to be more insectivorous than other tern species; grasshoppers, dragonflies, moths, grubs,

locusts, earthworms etc. are taken (Gochfeld *et al.* 2018). In winter, it was found to prey mainly on fiddler crabs (*Uca tangeri*) and occasionally on fish and locusts in Guinea-Bissau (Stienen *et al.* 2008). In Sriharikota Island, it was observed feeding on insect road kills (Sivakumar 2004). In Gujarat, it is a widely distributed winter visitor and found across the state mainly in all types of water – sea coasts, tidal creeks, rivers, ponds etc. and occasionally in grasslands and agricultural fields.

Three Gull-billed Terns were seen catching locusts and other insects in agricultural fields near Bhavnagar in September 1999 (Bhatt 2000).

This observation of a large flock of Gull-billed Terns feeding in agricultural fields is interesting and points to the species being beneficial to farmers. The large flock observed here consuming caterpillars all afternoon would have, without any doubt, been helpful to the farmer in removing these pests from the field. Almost no studies are done regarding this behaviour of the Gull-billed Tern during the non-breeding season (in winter) in India and this documentation can be of help to researchers in identifying bird species beneficial to agriculture in India.

References

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Arctic Skua from Nal Sarovar

Sunil Kini: 78 @ Gokuldham, Nr Eklavya School, Sanand-Sanathal Road, Ahmedabad 382210. sunil_kini@yahoo.com



Sunil Kini

The Arctic Skua, (*Stercorarius parasiticus*), which is also known as the Parasitic Jaeger, is a seabird (a pelagic species) of the Skua family, *Stercorariidae*. They have a reputation of being avian pirates, as they are known to steal food from other birds. This species breeds in the north of Eurasia and North America, with significant populations as far south as northern Scotland and it is a migrant, wintering at sea in the tropics and southern oceans (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

On 13 October 2018, a Saturday, at around 09:30 hrs, while on a routine bird watching trip inside Nal Sarovar Sanctuary,