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NEW MIGRATION RECORDS FOR THE DAMARA TERN *STERNA BALAENARUM*

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The Damara Tern *Sterna balaenarum* is Africa's smallest breeding tern and is a near-endemic breeder to Namibia (Simmons 2005). It is globally Near-threatened (IUCN 2009) and breeds on the coastal mainland where the cold Benguela Current meets the Namib Desert. All but a small fraction leave south-western Africa for non-breeding grounds on the west African coast (Simmons 2005). Birds leave their respective breeding grounds at the end of the austral summer, latest April, and move northward along the Namibian coast where they coalesce with other post-breeding Damara Terns into larger flocks before migration (Braby et al. 1992). Groups then migrate northward to over-winter in countries such as coastal Gabon, Congo, and even as far as Nigeria (Bourdillon 1944, Elgood et al. 1973, Wallace 1973), Liberia (Borrow and Demey 2001) and Senegal (Brown 1979).

The first record of a ringed tern was in Benin in October 2000 (Oschadleus 2001, Table 1). Despite 98% of the breeding population being found in Namibia (Crawford and Simmons 1997), this individual had been ringed as a chick in South Africa in December 1999 (Oschadleus 2001). Since 1984, c. 1250 Damara Terns have been ringed in Namibia but because of a lack of observation at their non-breeding grounds, there have been few returns in the past. However, communication regarding ringing returns and migrant sightings have increased in recent years. On 16 October 2004, an individual ringed as a chick near Swakopmund, Namibia, was found in Grand Popo, Benin, on 21 November 2001, in the same region the first individual was found (Table 1).



Figure 1 - Damara Terns and Common Terns roosting on Lighthouse Beach, Tarkwa Bay, Lagos, Nigeria on 15 August 2008

Another chick ringed in the breeding season of 2000/01 near Swakopmund was found with a flock of other Damara Terns in Gabon in 2006. From April to September between 100–200 Damara Terns are often seen in Akanda NP, north east of Libreville, Gabon (van de Weghe pers. comm. 2008, Boix 2010, Table 1). They roost on wide sandy beaches and feed over shallow waters at Mondah Bay not far from land. They are also common at the outlet of the Ngove Loange NP, where they are possibly just passage migrants (van de Weghe pers. comm. 2008, Table 1). During the first half of September 2006, 100–150 birds were seen daily roosting on the beach together with between 2000–3000 Royal *Sterna maxima* and Common Terns *Sterna hirundo* (van de Weghe pers. comm. 2008, Table 1). On 14 August 2010 15 birds were seen at Iguela near the lagoon mouth called St. Catherine, none were ringed, several were in



breeding plumage and a few were in non-breeding plumage (Boix pers. comm. 2010. Table 1). They were roosting on the sand, but were not mingling with other terns a few hundred metres away (Boix pers. comm. 2010).



Figure 2 - Ringed Damara Terns roosting on Lighthouse Beach, Tarkwa Bay, Lagos, Nigeria on 14 August 2008.

In August 2008 I travelled to Nigeria to survey non-breeding Damara Terns near Lagos. I found they most commonly occurred on a long stretch of beach called Lighthouse Beach, Tarkwa Bay (Table 1, Figure 1). Damara Terns were observed flying past, foraging behind the breakers or coming in to roost or preen on the beach. After speaking to local residents and fishermen at Tarkwa Bay, I discovered that terns, including (occasionally) Damara Terns, were regularly trapped and eaten. The maximum number of Damara Terns

ashore simultaneously during the day was 32 birds. I subsequently discovered that Damara Terns were roosting over-night at Lighthouse Beach when I flushed 200–300 individuals at 06h00 on 16 August 2008. The group flew offshore, presumably to feed. During the two-week survey, four Damara Terns were recorded wearing metal rings. One of these had a combination of two yellow rings unique to one individual trapped at its nest site at a breeding colony near Swakopmund, Namibia, on 20 November 2003, 4000 km south along the coast from Lagos (Figure 2). It was subsequently trapped on 11 November 2007 and on the 11 November 2008 within metres of the same nest site. This record is the first ringing return for the species in Nigeria and re-confirms this species as a migrant to these west African countries. It is assumed that the other three ringed individuals were birds ringed in Namibia, but the possibility exists that some or all of them were ringed in South Africa. These records contribute to a growing knowledge of the migration patterns of non-breeding Damara Terns.

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the capture and re-capture of breeding individuals near Swakopmund, Namibia. Christian Boix and JP van de Weghe relayed vital information regarding Damara Tern migrant counts in Gabon.

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**Table 1** – Records of migrant Damara Terns in west African countries during non-breeding season

Ring no	Date	Ringing location	Coordinates	Date	Re-sighting location	Coordinates	Reference
F44378	16 Dec 1999	Struis Bay, South Africa	S34° 34' E20°00'	Oct 2000	Grand Popo, Benin	N06°15' E01°44'	Oschadleus 2001
BC69491	21 Nov 2001	Swakopmund, Namibia	S22°42' E14°32'	16 Oct 2004	Grand Popo, Benin	N06°15' E01°44'	R Braby, pers. comm. 2008
Individual seen with white colour ring	2000/01 season	Swakopmund, Namibia	S22°44' E14°32'	Winter 2006	Gabon	-	R Braby, pers. comm. 2008
100-200 (no rings seen)	-	-	-	Apr-Sep 2006	Akanda NP, Gabon	N00°37' E09°31"	van de Weghe pers. comm 2008
1 (no ring seen)	-	-	-	31 Jul 2010	Akanda NP, Gabon	N00°37' E09°31"	Boix pers comm 2010
BC69752	20 Nov 2003	Swakopmund, Namibia	S22°44' E14°32'	06 Aug 2008	Lagos, Nigeria	N06°46' E03°23'	This study
BC69752	11 Nov 2007	Swakopmund, Namibia	S22°44' E14°32'	14 Aug 2008	Lagos, Nigeria	N06°46' E03°23'	This study
BC69752	11 Nov 2008	Swakopmund, Namibia	S22°44' E14°32'	15 Aug 2008	Lagos, Nigeria	N06°46' E03°23'	This study
1-32 day roost, at least four ringed, <300 overnight-roost, individuals flying past	-	-	-	4-17 Aug 2008	Lagos, Nigeria	N06°46' E03°23'	This study
100-150 (no rings seen)	-	-	-	beginning Sep 2006	Ngove Loange NP, Gabon	-	van de Weghe pers comm 2008
15 individuals (no rings seen)	-	-	-	14 August 2010	Near Iguela	S01°46' E16°17'	Boix pers comm 2010