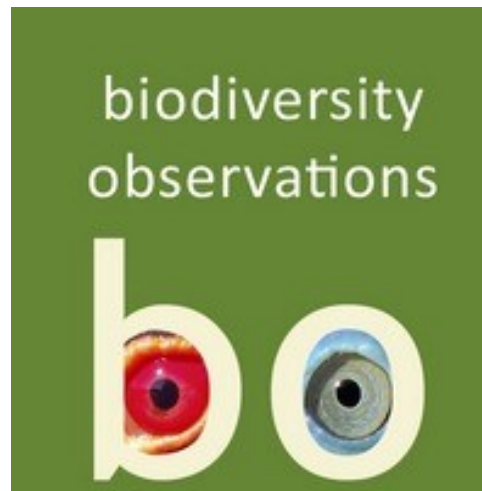


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An Australian Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon macrotarsa* scavenging on discarded human food

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Abstract

Scavenging human foods is known within the family Laridae, but this behaviour is more typically seen in gulls rather than terns. This note reports behaviour of an Australian Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon macrotarsa* scavenging a discarded French fry. This species' diet mainly comprises of invertebrates such as insects, crustaceans and worms, though a degree of opportunism has been demonstrated by published records of fishes, rodents and lizards also being taken. The observation here expands our knowledge of novel food items in the Australian Gull-billed Tern.

Observation

On 9 October 2024, two Australian Gull-billed Terns *Gelochelidon macrotarsa* were observed on a beach in Maroochydore, Queensland (26°38'40"S, 153°06'09"E), Australia (Figure 1). Field identification was determined by observing their thick, slightly downcurved black bills, black legs, and their body plumages being pale silvery-grey above with the paler white rump and tail (Higgins & Davies 1996). At approximately 10:20 hours, one of the terns flew to a section of beach within the swash zone and picked up a French fry that had been discarded earlier by recreationalists (Figure 1). The tern dipped the food item into the water and proceeded to negotiate it in its bill before flying away with it.

Discussion

While scavenging discarded human foods and other refuse materials is known within seabirds of the family Laridae, this behaviour is more typically seen in gulls (Smith & Carlile 1993, Bosch et al. 1994, Rock 2005, Auman et al. 2011) rather than terns. The diet of the Australian Gull-billed Tern mainly comprises of invertebrates such as insects,



Figure 1: Australian Gull-billed Tern handling a French fry.
Photograph by M. Mo.

crustaceans and worms (Hobbs 1961, Serventy et al. 1971, Barker & Vestjens 1989, Higgins & Davies 1996). However, a degree of opportunism in this species has been demonstrated by published records of individuals exploiting fish, rodents and possibly waterbird chicks as prey in inland areas (Hobbs 1976) and even prey items such as lizards (Serventy et al. 1971). In particular, there is a published record of Gull-billed Terns *G. nilotica*, a former conspecific (del Hoyo et al. 2014), scavenging dead dragonflies from a road (Sivakumar 2004), reflecting similar opportunism as the case reported here of anthropogenic food being exploited.

The Australian Gull-billed Tern is documented to wash food sometimes in water before swallowing (Watson 1955). This behaviour was briefly observed in the tern dipping the French fry in the water before dispersing. However, it is also possible that the dipping behaviour, in this instance, was related to wetting the food item to soften it for swallowing.

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