

Slender-billed Gulls *Larus genei* breeding at El Nasser salinas, northern Egypt, June 2017

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The Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* breeds widely at isolated scattered localities from Senegal and Mauritania through the Iberian peninsula to the Mediterranean and Black seas, east to Asia Minor, the Middle East, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and northwest India. The birds winter around the Mediterranean, Black and Caspian seas, on the coast of the Arabian peninsula, and south to the Horn of Africa. The number breeding around the Black and Mediterranean seas was estimated at 140 000–205 000 in 1999–2000 (Wetlands International 2014).

In Egypt, the Slender-billed Gull is a common winter visitor. During the winters of 2013–2016, more than 40 000 individuals were counted in the north, around lake Manzala, El Malaha, Port Fouad and lake Burulus (MIH unpublished data). Abdel Megid (1945) recorded the first Egyptian breeding colony, on Gezira Dib in El Malaha, east Port Said. In 1979, eggs were examined that had been taken from 200–400 nests in El Malaha (Meininger & Mullie 1981). El Malaha then was the only site where the species was breeding in Egypt. In 1990, 5688 nests were counted there (Meininger & Atta 1994). Slender-billed Gulls started breeding at lake Qarun (Fayoum) in the early 1990s and in summer 1998 an estimated 1000 pairs nested on El Qarn island there (Baha El Din 1999). The total number of breeding birds in the two Slender-billed Gull colonies, at El Qarn island (Fayoum) and El Malaha (Port Said) in Egypt was 12 675 individuals in 2014, which represents over 9% of the currently estimated breeding birds for the Black and Mediterranean seas (Habib 2015). The main objective of the present study was to find the breeding colonies of Slender-billed Gull in Port Said governorate after development of the Port Fouad area, especially the construction of the new Suez canal by-pass and new Eastern port and to compare the results with previous data.

METHODS AND STUDY AREAS

The study areas are located within Port Said governorate on scattered small sandy dykes at Port Fouad, in the El Nasser company salinas (31° 13' N, 32° 19' E), effectively a hypersaline lake divided into basins, in the northwestern corner of the Sinai peninsula. The eastern side of the El Nasser salinas is bordered by the new by-pass of the Suez canal. The El Nasser salinas are connected with the main Suez canal through a narrow canal. The El Nasser salinas lake is apparently fixed in size, having a length of up to 12 km along the Suez canal and up to 6 km along the Mediterranean sea, giving a more or less rectangular shape. The El Nasser salinas lake is shallow with a depth of only 70–100 cm.

A car was needed to visit the nesting sites. The weather was hot, over 36°C in June 2017. Visits to the various parts of colony were kept short: 5–15 min in duration. Several visits were made to the colony, the first on 11 June 2017, and then other visits on 12, 14, 16, 18 and 20 June and in mid August, all 2017. Counts of Slender-billed Gulls were done using the total count method. Nest counts were also made, the counting units being apparently-occupied nests. The total number of nests at a given site was the summed numbers of occupied and unoccupied nests that appear to have been used during the 2017 breeding season (Bibby *et al* 2007). Most behavioural observations were made using binoculars from the best vantage points available, as the rather muddy and loose substrate prevented close access.



Plate 1. Nesting adult Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* El Nasser salinas, northern Egypt, June 2017. © MI Habib



Plate 2. Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* nest with 3 eggs, El Nasser salinas, northern Egypt, June 2017. © MI Habib



Plate 3. Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* nest with one egg and one chick, El Nasser salinas, northern Egypt, June 2017. © MI Habib

RESULTS (Plates 1–17)

At the El Nasser salinas of Port Fouad the Slender-billed Gull has established a breeding colony on small scattered muddy dykes. On those dykes, on 11 June 2017, c24 500 adult birds (total 12 250 nests) with 5–10 day-old chicks protected by adults (small chicks not counted) were counted (Plates 10–13). Adult breeders foraged at lake Manzala and the Suez canal to feed their chicks. I saw the first four fledged Slender-billed Gulls on 16 June, feeding with parents at the Port Fouad saline basin.

The Slender-billed Gull colony was mixed with breeding Little *Sternula albifrons*, Common *Sterna hirundo* and Sandwich *S. sandvicensis* Terns (Plates 16, 17). The Slender-billed Gulls start breeding (courtship, mating and building nests) 2nd week April–2nd week May. The typical Slender-billed Gull nest is a scrape or shallow depression surrounded



Plate 4. Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* nest with 3 eggs and 1 chick, El Nasser salinas, northern Egypt, June 2017. © MI Habib



Plate 5. Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* nest with 5 chicks, El Nasser salinas, northern Egypt, June 2017. © MI Habib



Plate 6. Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* chicks seeking shade El Nasser salinas, northern Egypt, June 2017. © MI Habib



Plate 7. Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* nests, with chicks, El Nasser salinas, northern Egypt, June 2017. © MI Habib



Plate 8. Adult Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* feeding two chicks, El Nasser salinas, northern Egypt, June 2017. © MI Habib



Plate 9. Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* adults guarding chicks, El Nasser salinas, northern Egypt, June 2017. © MI Habib



Plate 10. Part of the Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* colony, El Nasser salinas, northern Egypt, June 2017. © MI Habib

with old feathers and old pieces of wood or old nesting material from previous breeding seasons (Plates 1–4). The nests are very close to each other, not more than 20 cm between each nest (Plate 7). The Slender-billed Gulls started to lay eggs in clutches of one–four eggs (Plates 2–4). On 16 June 2017, I found a nest with five chicks indicating more than one female laying in the same nest (Plate 5). Parent birds were observed feeding young chicks



Plate 11. Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* adults with chicks, cooling, El Nasser salinas, northern Egypt, June 2017.
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Plate 12. Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* adults, fledglings and chicks, El Nasser salinas, northern Egypt, June 2017.
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with small *Tilapia*, other small fish, and worms. Chicks beg by pecking at the base of the adult's bill from the side, and they feed by placing their partly open bills across the adult's gape or inside the beak and gulping down the regurgitate which spurts from the parent's throat (Plate 8). Most of the fledglings fed, with adults, by picking from the water's surface



Plate 13. View of south part of Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* colony, El Nasser salinas, northern Egypt, June 2017. © MI Habib



Plate 14. Adult Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei*, El Nasser salinas, northern Egypt, June 2017. © MI Habib



Plate 15. Adult Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei*, El Nasser salinas, northern Egypt, June 2017. © MI Habib

at the saline lagoons and cooled off there on hot days (Plates 10, 11). Little, Common and Sandwich Terns sometimes attack Slender-billed Gull chicks or fledglings that get close to their nests (Plates 16, 17).

DISCUSSION

The size of the Slender-billed Gull colony at El Nasser salinas represents over 12% of the currently estimated breeding bird numbers for the Black and Mediterranean seas (Wetlands International 2014). Only 1350 nests were counted in 2014 (Habib 2015). Perhaps the present number is due to amalgamation of all breeding Slender-billed Gulls at the one



Plate 16. Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* fledgling that had been attacked by a Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*, El Nasser salinas, northern Egypt, June 2017. © MI Habib



Plate 17. Sandwich Terns *Sterna sandvicensis* breeding at Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* colony, El Nasser salinas, northern Egypt, June 2017. © MI Habib

location after construction of the new Suez canal by-pass and Eastern port. This colony at the El Nasser salinas merits protection from further development within the breeding area. The Slender-billed Gull colony faces disturbance during the breeding season from

fishermen and others walking through the nesting area. Signs should be posted forbidding all human intrusion in the breeding areas throughout the entire breeding period.

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