



Damara Tern

Damaraseeswael

Sterna balaenarum

The Damara Tern is an intra-African migrant, known to breed only in South Africa and Namibia but possibly also in southern Angola (Brooke 1981b,d). The South African population is *c.* 150 pairs (Cooper *et al.* 1984). In Namibia, there are *c.* 12 000 adults between the Kunene River (1711BC) and Sandwich Harbour (2314AD) (Simmons 1993b) and *c.* 1450 birds south to the Orange River, with highest densities in the central coastal areas (Simmons *et al.* in press). The distribution map reflects the higher numbers occurring on the coast of northern Namibia, the core area of distribution, as well as south of the breeding localities in the Conception Bay area (2314BD), at Sylvania Hill (2414BB), near Hottentot Bay (2614BB), Lüderitz (2615CA), Alexander Bay (2816CB), Port Nolloth (2916BB), east of Cape Agulhas (3420CA) and in Algoa Bay (3325DB) (Siegfried & Johnson 1977; Clinning 1978; Brooke 1984b), but not that at Elizabeth Bay (2615CC) (Johnson 1979) where populations have declined (R.E.S. unpubl. data).

Habitat: It is coastal, and breeds only on the mainland. In Namibia it nests, on average, 1.7–3.2 km inland (Simmons 1993b) to avoid predators, such as the Blackbacked Jackal *Canis mesomelas*, that forage for carrion along the coastline (Johnson & Frost 1978; Simmons & Braine 1994). In South Africa, where suitable habitat is more limited, nests are often nearer the sea. It favours breeding localities which provide good visibility (Clinning 1978). Eggs are laid on bare ground or in shallow scrapes on featureless gravel plains, in wide troughs between sand-dunes, at dry salt pans, on rocky ledges or at rehabilitated diamond mines (Brooke 1984b). It forages in estuaries and in sheltered bays in the breaker zone (Brooke 1984b), but also beyond the breakers on high-energy coasts (Braby *et al.* 1992).

Movements: The models confirm a large decrease in numbers in winter, when the majority of the population migrates to west Africa (Cameroon to Ghana) (Clinning 1978; Brooke 1984b). It appears that virtually all birds leave South Africa, but in Namibia *c.* 100 remain throughout the year. Post-breeding birds gather in large flocks (Braby *et al.* 1992), presumably in preparation for migration.

Breeding: It nests in loose colonies at an average density of about 1–8 nests/km², depending on the site, or as scattered pairs (Maclean 1985c; Simmons & Braine 1994). Breeding is initiated in October and most egg-laying is finished in March (Clinning 1978; Simmons & Braine 1994). The models show the initiation of breeding in October, a peak December–January, and cessation of most breeding by April. Seasonal trends appear similar in the four relevant coastal zones. However, near Swakopmund (2214DA) breeding peaks in November, but at Möwe Bay (1912BC) the peak is in February (Simmons & Braine 1994).

Historical distribution and conservation: The historical distribution is not known to have differed from the present, although breeding east of Cape Point (3318AD) was first noted only in the mid 1970s (Brooke 1984b). A former colony just north of Cape Town (3318CD) has been extinct for decades (Brooke 1984b) and birds probably bred where the coastal resort at Henties Bay (2214AB) now stands.

The Damara Tern is listed in the South African Red Data book as 'rare' (Brooke 1984b) and classified as 'near-threatened' globally (Collar *et al.* 1994). Habitat alteration, such as diamond mining, and planting sand dunes with vegetation has rendered some former sites unsuitable for breeding (Brooke 1984b; R.E.S. unpubl. data). It has probably been displaced from other sites by human disturbance and encroaching alien vegetation (Crawford *et al.* 1994; J. Cooper pers. comm.). Offroad vehicles are known to destroy nests and disturb breeding birds (Clinning 1978; Brooke 1984b; Braby 1995). Driving in areas where the species nests needs to be carefully controlled. A suggestion that it was hunted by humans for food in the Gulf of Guinea (Brooke 1984b) now seems unlikely (A. del Nevo pers. comm. to R.E.S.).

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Recorded in 72 grid cells, 1.6%
Total number of records: 798
Mean reporting rate for range: 9.4%

