

A BREEDING RECORD FOR THE SOOTY TERN IN KENYA

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The breeding status in Kenya of the Sooty Tern, Sterna fuscata Linnaeus, is not clearly defined in the literature. North (1945, p. 33) has previously pointed out that Jackson (1938, p. 427) makes a sole incidental reference to S. fuscata as being plentiful in July and August on the islands of the Kiunga Archipelago without making a definite statement that it was found breeding; Jackson (ibid, p. 435) also makes no reference to S. fuscata "on a small coral island off the headland between Lamu and Kipini" which is probably the Tenewe Islands. Moreau (1940, p. 50) makes no mention of S. fuscata in Kenya but later (1950, p. 425) indicates that it breeds on the Kiunga Islands in July and August, presumably inferring this from Jackson's reference. Available literature on the 1951 Oxford University Expedition to Kiunga (Anon, 1952, p. 10; Huxley, 1952, p. 533) makes no mention of S. fuscata, and Praed and Grant (1952, p. 435) does not record it breeding in Kenya. The 1961 Oxford University Expedition to Kiunga (Fogden, personal communication, 1963) also found no evidence of S. fuscata but this expedition did not visit all the Kiunga Islands.

On August 7th. 1963, the writer visited the Tenewe Islands, situated about one mile offshore and eleven miles to the south-west of Lamu Island, and found a breeding colony of about 5,000 pairs of S. fuscata. Birds were packed close together on the areas of short grass or shallow soil all over the islands above high tide mark. Most birds were incubating but there were a number of young birds which had not yet reached the flying stage, indicating that egg laying started towards the end of June. Many S. fuscata were also seen frequenting the Vinyika Rocks about five miles to the north-east of the Tenewe Islands but it was not possible to land there to confirm breeding. Colour photographs taken at the time show clearly the uniform sooty black upperparts, the absence of a pale collar round the hind neck and the white eyestripe reaching as far as but not behind the eye, characters which distinguish this species from the Bridled Tern, S. anaethetus Scopoli.

Praed and Grant (ibid) record S. fuscata as breeding on Mait Island in the Gulf of Aden, on Latham Island to the south east of Zanzibar Island and on Mafia Island off the Tanganyika coast. It also breeds in very large numbers in the Seychelles Islands (Ridley and Percy, 1958).

The probable absence of S. fuscata from the area south of Lamu and its possible presence in the Kiunga Islands to the north of Lamu in Jackson's time, considered in conjunction with more recent information and the present record, emphasises the uncertain and irregular breeding habits of the species.

The present record provides an interesting link in the breeding distribution of S. fuscata on the East African seaboard and helps to clarify its breeding status on the Kenya Coast.

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In addition to S. fuscata, the Tenewe Islands contain a breeding colony of several hundred pairs of Noddy Tern, Anous stolidus Linnaeus; one pair of Roseate Tern, Sterna dougallii Montagu in breeding plumage and several Lesser Crested Tern, Sterna bengalensis Lesson, in non-breeding plumage were also seen but were not found breeding; one Bridled Tern, S. anaethetus Scopoli, was seen off the Vinyika Rocks.

The Tenewe Islands appear to contain the largest breeding colony of terns on the Kenya coast and would well repay further visits during the breeding season between June and September by anyone who can find a suitable reliable boat and who is prepared to risk the high seas at this time of the year.

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