

COMMON TERN - RINGING OBSERVATIONS

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Whilst catching Sanderlings near the Olifants river mouth, Common Terns were caught in the mist net as well. The first tern taken from the net was released on the spot and its reaction observed. Without any hesitation the bird took off from the palm of my hand. However, it did not seem to make a stout effort and after some wingbeats, it just glided along until it landed on the water. The very same procedure was tried on a Sanderling which flew off into the moonless night. After this incident the remaining catch of 17 terns was held in keeping compartments until first light in the morning. The birds were then ringed and put on the ground from where they took off after ruffling their feathers.

No unusual behaviour from terns was observed during the day when a count of the surrounding area was made. Just after dark a roosting flock was disturbed. All the terns took off but one. This bird was very aggressive but did not make the least attempt to fly away. It turned out to be a bird ringed the previous night. It was kept over until the next morning. During the course of that night more terns were caught. Several times during the night a check was made on the keeping compartments. On each occasion one or two birds were found to be lying on their backs but otherwise they were just as aggressive as the rest. They were turned on their feet but unfortunately, I did not ascertain whether the same two birds referred to above were amongst them. In the morning all the terns took off from the ground except two. These tried to walk away. I decided to throw them into the air, as high as I possibly could. After a short free fall these two terns ruffled their feathers in mid-air and flew off strongly, repeating the ruffling several times until they flew out of my sight.

No unusual behaviour of any tern was seen during the morning. In the early afternoon however, two terns were spotted sitting on a sandbank near the river mouth. When I approached them they made for the river, wading all the way. One swam across the river and the other swam ashore about 100 metres further downstream. After leaving it in peace for some time to enable it to dry, I eventually beat the bird to the water. Again it turned out to be one of the birds which had not taken off from the ground earlier in the morning. It was examined for any visible injuries but no reason was apparent for this strange behaviour. Holding the tern on the upper part of the legs and moving the hand up and down, no abnormality was observed while the bird used its wings. Again it showed aggressiveness and the bird seemed to be strong in the hand. I then decided to release it in the same way as I did in the morning by throwing it into the air as high as I could. Just as it had done in the morning, the bird flew out of sight as if there had never been

anything wrong with it.

Unfortunately, I had to leave the area about two hours after this last incident. I am, however, at a loss to explain the strange behaviour and can only assume that some physical factor might play a part in it. Clearly more observations are needed to come to any conclusion, and I would appeal to anyone ringing terns to take note of any unusual encounters.

BIRD-IN-THE-HAND

TERN MORTALITY

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I was interested to see your appeal on tern mortality in Safring (Potential difficulty when ringing terns 5(1):8). I had a very similar experience to the one described when trapping terns in the Ivory Coast in February 1968. I had mistnetted them at a roost on a sandbank, and kept them overnight in large cardboard boxes, several to a box. The next day all but three flew off alright, but I had three recoveries within days of birds picked up wandering about on beaches further up the coast. I caught about 90 birds on two occasions, losing three directly as they failed to fly away and later died, on the second more successful occasion, which also produced the recoveries. The birds were about half-each Common and Black Terns, and were affected indiscriminately. At least some survived all night, as two of the Black terns were recovered in subsequent years in Ghana. Although my boxes were perhaps less stuffy than Tony Tree's bird bags, they were clearly not good enough, though well impregnated with airholes. The overnight temperature at Grand Bassam, where I caught the birds, was certainly not less than 25°C, and though in the open, the bird boxes were under cover on a verandah and sheltered from any breeze there may have been. Tony Tree specifically mentioned sea-terns but obviously ALL terns are at risk, as half of mine were Black Terns.
