

Gull-billed Tern

Gelochelidon nilotica

Category A

Very rare vagrant

1 record

Breeds mainly around the Mediterranean basin but further north there are a few small isolated colonies on the North Sea coast in Germany and Denmark. Winters in sub-Saharan Africa.

There had been 336 British records up to the end of 2010, 40 of which were in Kent. Records were more numerous in the past, with 72% of county records dating from before 1970. Kent records fall between late April and early October, with a peak in August. There had not been a July record in Kent prior to 1971, but five of the last twelve have occurred in that month.

The only area record is as follows:

1997 Copt Point, 11th July (D. A. Gibson)

An account of the first area record is given below.

Gull-billed Tern at Copt Point

11th July 1997

(Dale A Gibson)

Weather conditions:

A sunny, mild day with good visibility to about 1 to 1.5 miles, but with haze further out and high mist overhead. There was a light to moderate (force 3-4) north-easterly wind.

Circumstances of the find:

I was on the rocks at Copt Point scanning the sea, when from behind the pier I noticed five terns coming towards the point. I got my telescope (Kowa 30x) on to them, and could see that they were Sandwich Terns, however the last bird looked different. It had a short, stubby, all-black bill, more rounded wing-tips, broader wings and a more stocky body.

As they passed by feeding, I saw a dark smudge on the underside of the primaries, darker than that shown by the Sandwich Terns, and a greyer wash to the upperparts. It came within 100-150 metres, and I had views at this range in good light for 30-40 seconds, then a few minutes in poorer light as it flew towards the sun. The combination of structure and plumage left no doubt that it was an adult Gull-billed Tern.

As it was flying away, it was still easily picked out from the other terns, even when silhouetted, as the more languid gull-like flight was obvious.

Description of the bird:

Size, shape, jizz: The shape and flight were very different from Sandwich Tern, and made it easy to pick out. The wings were broader, with more rounded wing-tips, and the body was more stocky. The flight was more languid, and more like that of a small gull.

Head and upperparts: Crown black. Mantle grey, perhaps a shade darker than Sandwich Tern. Rump grey, unlike Sandwich. Tail and wings darker grey, with darker tips to the outer primaries.

Underparts: Whitish body, with grey underwings and a darker smudge on the tips of the underside of the primaries, which was more prominent (extended further along the trailing edge) than on Sandwich Tern.

Bare parts: The bill was shorter and stubbier than that of Sandwich Tern, and was all-black, lacking the yellow tip.

Voice: not heard to call.

Comments on the record:

There had been 289 British records up to the end of 1996, 36 of which were in Kent. The Kent records fell between April and October, with a peak in August. There had not been a July record in Kent prior to 1971, but three of the last four previous Kent records occurred in that month.