

### Little Tern

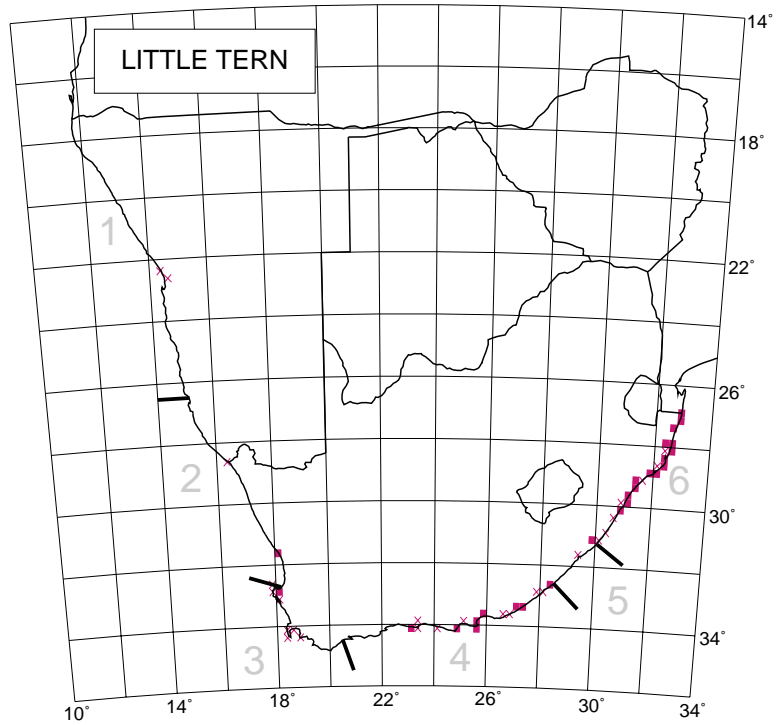
Kleinseeswael

*Sterna albifrons*

The Little Tern is a nonbreeding migrant from the Palearctic to the coasts of southern Africa. It is common only along the northern coast of KwaZulu-Natal where up to 300 birds may gather at roosts on sandbanks or islands (Ryan *et al.* 1986; Cyrus 1991). It occurs sparsely along the southern and southwestern coasts of South Africa and is a vagrant elsewhere in southern Africa. The near-absence from coastal Zone 5 is probably due to a lack of suitable habitat along the coast of the Transkei.

Two subspecies occur along the east coast of Africa; *S. a. saundersi*, which is frequently treated as a distinct species, Saunders' Tern, breeds on the coast from East Africa to India. It was formerly thought that the Little Terns that migrate to KwaZulu-Natal were Saunders' Terns but examination of specimens showed that all were nominate *albifrons*; presumably from the population that breeds in the Middle East and around the Black and Caspian seas (Clancey 1982c; Cramp *et al.* 1985).

Arrival begins in August; atlas reporting rates peak in January and decrease as the birds depart February–May. Some occur throughout the year along the coast of northern KwaZulu-Natal. The breeding grounds of the birds seen in small numbers in the southwestern Cape Province are not known. They could represent the most westerly occurrence of birds from populations that migrate along the eastern coast of Africa. Alternatively, they could represent the most southerly occurrence of birds from European or West African populations of the nominate race that have migrated along the Atlantic coast of Africa. The latter population has its main nonbreeding area along the coast of the Gulf of Guinea (Cramp *et al.* 1985), but some may straggle southwards as far as Namibia and the Cape Province. The patterns of occurrence in the models lend support to the former hypothesis; arrival and departure in the south and southwest is staggered, with coastal Zone 4 occupied October–April and coastal Zone 3 occupied November–March, and with a decrease in the number of records



Recorded in 49 grid cells, 1.1%  
 Total number of records: 599  
 Mean reporting rate for range: 4.0%

between these sections. The near-absence of records from the northern Cape Province and Namibia also makes it more likely that birds in the southwestern Cape Province belong to eastern, rather than western, breeding populations.

The only inland record in southern Africa is a storm-blown bird at the Umfolozi Game Reserve (2831B) in November (Cyrus & Robson 1980).

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