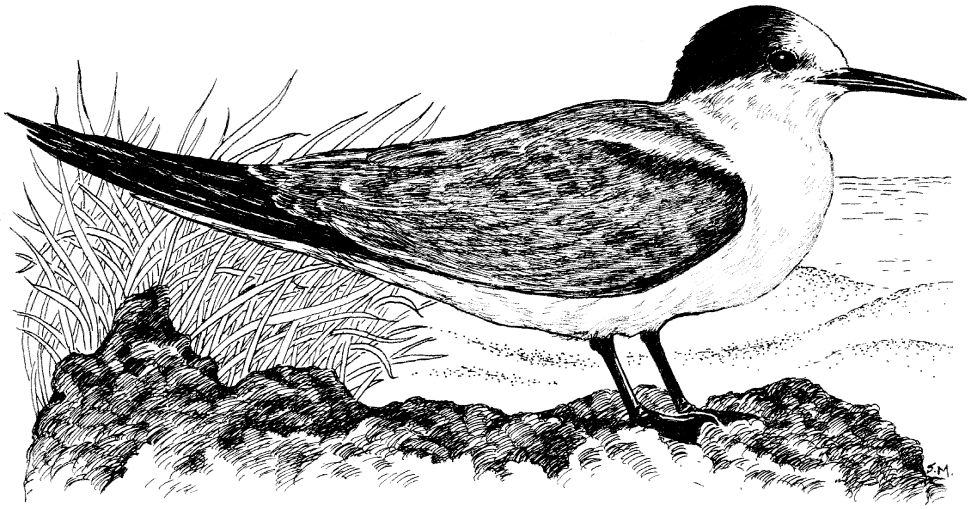


Common Tern

Gewone Seeswael

Sterna hirundo

The Common Tern is an abundant, nonbreeding Palearctic migrant to the coasts of southern Africa; few occur inland (e.g. Skead 1967b; Cyrus & Robson 1980). Ringing recoveries show that it migrates to southern Africa from two distinct parts of the breeding range: most recoveries are of populations which breed in northwestern Europe; the remainder are of birds breeding along the Black Sea coast of the Ukraine (Morant *et al.* 1983; Vandewalle 1988a; SAFRING). The actual proportions coming from each breeding area cannot be determined owing to differences in ringing effort in the breeding areas. Clancey (1976e) assigned 26 of 57 specimens in the Durban Natural Science Museum, mostly from KwaZulu-Natal, to the race *S. h. tibetana*. This subspecies breeds in Mongolia and Tibet and has its normal nonbreeding range along the shores of the eastern Indian and western Pacific oceans (Harrison 1983b). The presence of *tibetana* along the southern Africa coastline needs to be reassessed.

Most southern African birders do not attempt to distinguish the Common Tern from the Arctic Tern *S. paradisaea*, although it is possible (e.g. Malling Olsen & Larsson 1995). However, ringing studies have shown that the overwhelming majority of 'Commic' terns on southern African shores are in fact Common Terns; e.g. 98.4% of 2395 'Commic' terns ringed in Algoa Bay (3325DC) in 1971–72 were Common Terns (Edwards 1974; A.J. Tree *in litt.*; SAFRING).

Habitat: It frequents marine coasts, river estuaries and coastal lakes. It occurs mostly over the inner continental shelf, and seldom beyond the shelfbreak (e.g. Summerhayes *et al.* 1974). Some roost at sea at night, but most roost on coastal sandspits, points, estuaries, islands or artificial structures. Food is primarily small marine fish supplemented with crustaceans, insects and polychaete worms; prey are caught by plunge-diving.

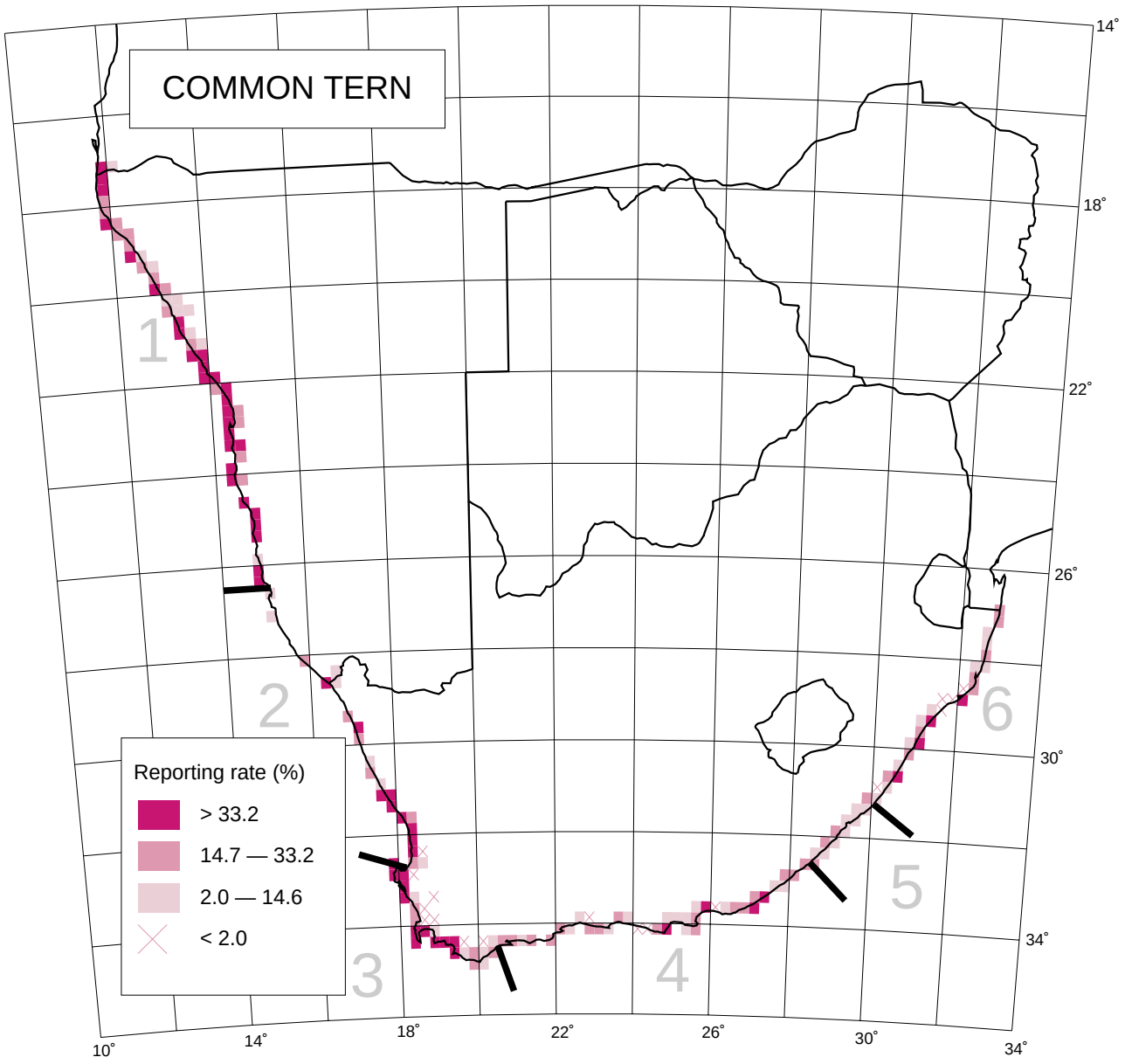
Movements: 52 birds ringed in southern Africa have been recovered in breeding areas during the breeding season; 46 (88%) were recovered in states bordering on the Baltic Sea, with 37% in Finland alone. The remaining six recoveries were from southern Poland, Nice in France, eastern Romania, Odessa in the Ukraine, and two near Velikiye (56°N 31°E) in western Russia. Recoveries of birds on passage were in Belgium, near Dieppe in France, in Portugal and at Point Noire (two), Congo (SAFRING). The northwest European population migrates along the Atlantic Ocean coast of Africa, staying close to the shore; some spread eastwards along the coast of southern Africa as far as Mozambique (Saurola 1978; Brooke *et al.* 1981; Muselet 1982). There is no evidence to support Cramp *et al.*'s (1985) statement that Common Terns breeding along the northwestern Black Sea coast in Ukraine migrate westwards through the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. Ring recoveries indicate that they migrate along the east coast of Africa; there are 14 recoveries from this region in KwaZulu-Natal, 13 in the eastern Cape Province, and three in the southwestern Cape Province, and recoveries of birds on passage in Bulgaria in August, Turkey in September and Somalia in August and May (Stoilovsky 1986; SAFRING). None of 21 307 terns ringed in Ukraine by Stoilovsky (1986) was recovered in the central or western Mediterranean Sea, or along the western Africa coastline. The hypothesis that east European populations take an eastern route to southern Africa receives further support: Common Terns ringed as far west as eastern Austria and Wroclaw, Poland, have been recovered in Kenya (Backhurst 1985); all recoveries in southern Africa of terns ringed in the interior of eastern Europe, southeast of the Baltic Sea coastal area, lie to the east of Port Elizabeth (3325DC) (SAFRING).

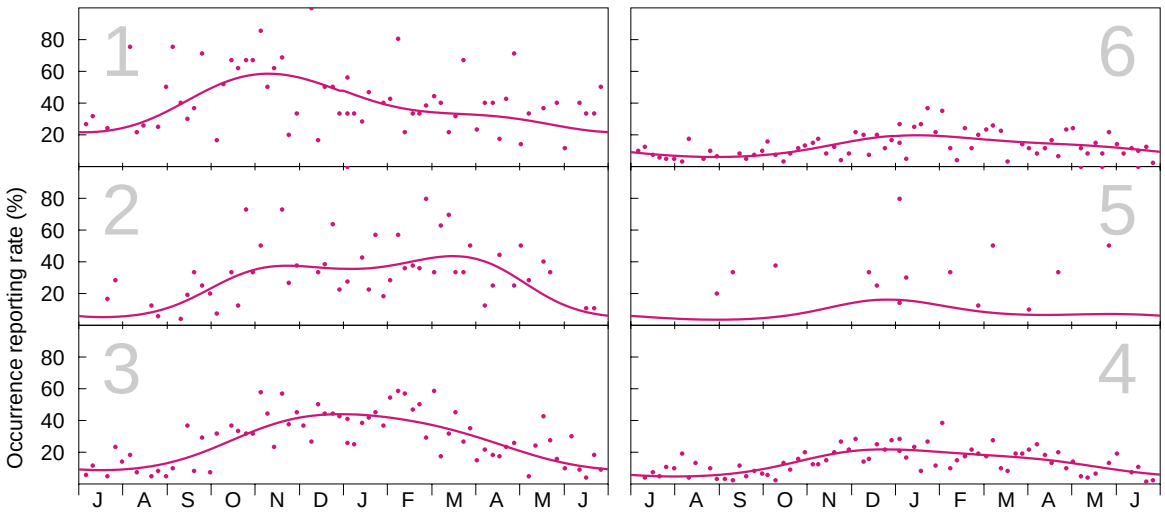
Southward movement from the Finnish breeding colonies begins in August with arrivals in southern Africa, as shown by numbers of ring recoveries and atlas reporting rates, mainly September–November (Saurola 1978). Northward departure is March–April, with birds returning to their breeding colonies in late May (Saurola 1978). Large numbers of first-year birds overwinter in southern Africa (e.g. Saurola 1978), accounting for relatively high reporting rates during the austral winter.

Historical distribution and conservation: The distribution of the Common Tern along the southern African coastline is unlikely to have been modified during the 20th century. Within southern Africa, most mortality occurs in November, shortly after the arrival of young birds weakened by migration (Avery 1984). Occasionally, epizootic infections cause large-scale mortalities (Rowan 1962a; Clancey 1977a). Hunting and snaring of terns, on the scale practised in West Africa (e.g. Dunn & Mead 1982), has not occurred in southern Africa.

A.J. Williams and L.G. Underhill

Recorded in 177 grid cells, 3.9%
Total number of records: 6259
Mean reporting rate for range: 21.9%





Models of seasonality for Zones. Number of records (top to bottom, left to right):
Occurrence: 252, 151, 361, 357, 24, 301.