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RECENT NESTING OF GULL-BILLED TERNS IN NORTHWEST FLORIDA

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In the Gulf states region, Gull-billed Terns (*Sterna nilotica*) nest primarily with or near other colonial seabirds in coastal habitats (Clapp et al. 1983). Black Skimmers (*Rynchops niger*) and Least Terns (*Sterna antillarum*) are the most common neighboring species (Weston 1933, Hallman 1960, Portnoy 1977). Nesting habitats in North America include sandy coastal beaches, estuary islands, tidal wetlands, and freshwater wetlands (Spendelov and Patton 1988). Gull-billed Terns also nest on deposits of dredged material (Portnoy 1977; Sears 1978; Soots and Landin 1978; H. Kale, unpublished report to Shell Oil Corp.).

Observations of breeding Gull-billed Terns along the northwest coast of Florida have been very infrequent. A nest with two eggs was found near Pensacola, Escambia County in 1932 (Weston 1933). Three nests with two eggs each were located on an island in St. Joseph Bay, Gulf County in 1960 (Hallman 1960); in subsequent years, one nest was found in 1963 and one in 1965 (Hallman 1968). H. Stevenson found a nest with two eggs on St. George Island, Franklin County in 1973 (Stevenson and Anderson, in press). Stevenson also located 5-8 pairs of Gull-billed Terns with young on a spoil island near Eastpoint, Franklin County in 1979 (Stevenson and Anderson, in press). This note reports our observations of Gull-billed Terns nesting along the northwest coast of Florida from 1989-1992.

Since 1988, we have studied a large colony of Least Terns and Black Skimmers nesting along the causeway that connects St. George Island to the mainland at Eastpoint, Franklin County. The causeway is about 1.9 km long and made primarily of fill material. A variety of low herbaceous vegetation, primarily grasses, lines each side of the paved road that runs

along the center of the causeway. Twice each breeding season we traversed the entire colony and censused active nests.

On 28 June 1989, we saw two Gull-billed Terns flying among the Least Terns and Black Skimmers at the site. An adult also was observed attending a chick on the west side of the colony, but no nest was found. On 1 June 1990, two Gull-billed Tern nests were located on the west side of the colony. Both of the nests were simple depressions in the sand-shell substrate and contained pieces of unconsolidated, dried vegetation. The first nest contained one egg and the second nest contained three eggs. On 22 June 1990, the first nest was empty, but the second nest contained one egg and one chick (Fig. 1). In 1991, we located two Gull-billed Tern nests in the colony, one on 31 May and one on 19 June, both of which contained three eggs. On 2 June 1992, we located three nests with two, three, and four eggs. The nests found in 1990-1992 as well as the adult observed attending the chick in 1989 all were in areas of the colony used predominantly by nesting Black Skimmers. Although we could not identify individuals, we assume the few breeding Gull-billed Terns seen each year have been returning birds exhibiting site tenacity for this colony.

Recent, extensive surveys for the Florida Breeding Bird Atlas (H. Kale, pers. comm.) and for Least Tern and Black Skimmer colonies (Gore 1991) have revealed no other Gull-billed Tern breeding sites in northwest Florida. This species maintains an extremely rare breeding presence in our geographic area.



Figure 1. Gull-billed Tern nest containing one egg and one chick observed on 22 June 1990, on the causeway to St. George Island, Franklin Co., Florida.

We thank S. Leitman for photographing the nest shown in Fig. 1. P. G. Merritt, H. W. Kale, and an anonymous referee provided helpful review comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

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