

Scarton F., Valle R., Rusticali. 2000. New breeding site of Lesser Crested Tern in Italy. British Birds 93: 448-451

The Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis* has a highly fragmented World distribution extending from Australia to the Mediterranean (Cramp 1985; del Hoyo *et al.* 1996). In the Mediterranean (fig. 1), breeding colonies are located on the two small islands of Geziret al Elba and Geziret Garah, off the Libyan coast, which held a total of 1,740 pairs in 1993 (Meininger *et al.* 1994). The only other regular breeding localities are the Ebro Delta in northeast Spain, where one or two pairs have bred since 1978 (Paterson 1997; Pérez-Hurtado & Masero 1997); and Valli di Comacchio in the southern Po Delta, northeast Italy, where a pair bred from 1985 to 1998, a third adult was paired with a Sandwich Tern *S. sandvicensis* in 1988 (probably) and in 1990, and two pairs bred in 1994 (P. Brichetti and U. F. Foschi *in litt.*). Elsewhere, a single Lesser Crested Tern probably paired with a Sandwich Tern in the Evros Delta, Greece, in 1987 (Goutner 1988), and the species bred in Albufera de Valencia, eastern Spain, in 1994-98, although there was no proof of nesting there in 1999 (Dies & Dies 1998 & *in litt.*).

The Laguna Veneta (Lagoon of Venice), in northeast Italy, extends over about 55,000 ha and is connected to the Adriatic Sea by three channels. It holds breeding colonies of gulls, terns and waders, including nationally important populations of Common Terns *S. hirundo* and Black-headed Gulls *Larus ridibundus*, while those of Common Redshanks *Tringa totanus* and Sandwich Terns are of international importance (Scarton & Valle 1997; Valle & Scarton 1996). The colonies have been regularly monitored since 1989 (Scarton *et al.* 1994).

The southern basin of the Lagoon consists of a large open waterbody (about 8,000 ha) dotted with hundreds of muddy islets, which are covered with, mainly, the saltmarsh-grass *Puccinellia palustris*, the sea-lavender *Limonium serotinum* and the glasswort *Salicornia fruticosa* (Valle & Scarton 1999). Each year, ten to 20 of these islets are occupied by colonies of gulls and terns, including Black-headed Gulls (mean of 120 pairs in 1997-99) and Common (940 pairs), Little *S. albifrons* (195 pairs) and Sandwich Terns (470 pairs), along with Common Redshanks, Avocets *Recurvirostra avosetta* and Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus*. In 1999, the largest colony was located on a 3.6-ha islet, which held a total of 1,060 pairs of waders, terns and gulls. The site is unprotected and is surrounded by water 0.1-0.5 m deep, with the bed mostly exposed during low tide. During 13th May to 22nd June, six visits were made to this colony, each of less than one hour in duration so as to minimise disturbance.

On 13th May 1999, a single Lesser Crested Tern was observed 500 m from the colony, with four Sandwich Terns. After several minutes, all five terns flew towards the colony. On 29th May, a Lesser Crested Tern was seen on a nest within a group of Sandwich Tern nests. The nest, which held just one egg, was 30-50 cm from the others, and 27 m from the water. On 3rd June, the incubating adult was caught and ringed, and the following measurements were recorded: maximum length 323 mm, bill 58 mm, tarsus 26.8 mm, tail length 146 mm, tail-fork length 63 mm. A Lesser Crested Tern was seen on the nest on 12th June (plate 000), and four days later the egg had apparently hatched. We estimated that hatching probably occurred about 15th June; considering an incubation period of 21-26 days (Cramp 1985), laying probably took place around 20th-25th May. In the Comacchio Lagoon, Brichetti & Foschi (1985) found one egg on 4th June; at the two Libyan colonies, laying date is estimated to be one month later, around late June/early July (Meininger *et al.* 1994).

At no time did we see two Lesser Crested Terns together. It is possible, therefore, that the individual that we observed was paired with a Sandwich Tern, as has already been reported at several other places (Brichetti & Foschi 1997; Paterson 1997; Dies & Dies 1998).

This represents the first observation of the Lesser Crested Tern at the Lagoon of Venice, and the first record for the Province of Venice and the entire Veneto Region. The species did not breed at Comacchio in 1999, owing to high water levels that flooded the traditional nesting places for terns (P. Bricchetti *in litt.*). In that year, some of the Sandwich Terns very probably moved from Comacchio to the southern Lagoon of Venice, about 80 km to the northwest, where the local colony increased by about 200 pairs between 1998 and 1999. It is possible, though not proven, that one (or both?) of the pair of Lesser Crested Terns accompanied them.

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Fig. 1. Sites in the Mediterranean with breeding records of Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis*.
1 Albufera; 2 Ebro Delta; 3 Lagoon of Venice; 4 Valli di Comacchio; 5 Evros Delta; 6 Geziret al Elba; 7 Geziret Garah.

000. Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis* on nest within colony of Sandwich Terns *S. sandvicensis*, Lagoon of Venice, Italy, May-June 1999.
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