

Interference by Galahs at Nests of Charadriiformes

by CLINTON J. SCHIPPER¹ and MICHAEL A. WESTON²

¹2 Orchard Drive, Croydon, Victoria 3136

²Birds Australia, Australian Bird Research Centre, 415 Riversdale Road, East Hawthorn, Victoria 3123

This note reports observations made during monitoring of Little Terns *Sterna albifrons sinensis* in eastern Victoria co-ordinated by the Department of Natural Resources and Environment. Observations were made by CJS during the 1994/95 breeding season.

The colony

The Little Tern colony under observation was at Mallacoota Bar, East Gippsland, Victoria. It consisted of approximately 35 breeding pairs and a varying, low number of non-breeding Little Terns. Through the length of the colony and parallel to the water's edge was a strip of Sea Rocket *Cackile maritima*, about 3 m wide. Two species of plovers were nesting within the Tern colony: Red-capped Plover *Charadrius ruficapillus* (about seven nests) and Hooded Plover *Thinornis rubricollis* (one nest). Both these plovers have previously been recorded nesting in or near Little Tern colonies (Reside 1988, Owen 1991, Egan & Smith 1994, Rose 1994, Jones 1995). Nesting Red-capped Plovers and some Little Terns used the Sea Rocket for shelter and protection but the Hooded Plover nest was at least 2 m from the nearest Sea Rocket. Hooded Plovers are currently considered Rare, and Little Terns (subspecies *sinensis*) are considered Vulnerable (Garnett 1993), so the colony represented the breeding site of two species of threatened Charadriiformes.

The observations

Between 12 December 1994 and 30 January 1995, the Tern colony was under observation almost every day. On several evenings between 21 December and 9 January, a flock of Galahs *Cacatua roseicapilla*, containing between 30 and 100 birds, flew in from across the inlet and landed in the colony, and fed on flowers and fruit of Sea Rocket. Galahs have recently been recorded feeding on *Cackile* elsewhere in coastal south-eastern Australia (Ashton & Black 1997, Rose 1997) and their tracks have been recorded at Little Tern colonies in New South Wales (Rose 1997).

After landing, Galahs were observed approaching Little Tern and Red-capped Plover nests on several occasions but only once approached the Hooded Plover nest. They approached brooding birds in one of two ways. Sometimes a Galah landed within a metre of the incubating bird and moved towards it with crest erected, head bowed and wings extended, and often emitting a loud screech, similar to the extreme form of the heraldic display described by Rowley (1990); Galahs sometimes repeatedly approached particular nests. Foraging Galahs also sometimes happened across an incubating bird while feeding.

As Galahs approached nests, they were mobbed by Little Terns which were not attending nests. Little Terns are known to mob other birds around colonies (Reside 1988, Reside et al. 1989, Owen 1990), and other potential terrestrial predators such as snakes and humans (Reside 1988, Anon. 1993), but there appears to be only one other published record of Little Terns mobbing parrots (Rose 1997). In our experience,

an incubating Little Tern responded to an approaching Galah by remaining on the nest and lunging at the Galah with its bill. However, Rose (1997) observed Little Tern adults repeatedly mobbing Galahs near the nest.

When approached by a Galah, incubating Red-capped Plovers usually left the nest and charged, both by running and flying, with the head held low. The Galah often retreated, with the Red-capped Plover continuing the chase for several metres. Once, when a Galah approached the Hooded Plover nest, the attendant plover left the nest, ran towards the Galah with its head down and its tail lowered and fanned, very similar to a running horizontal threat display described by Bransbury (1991). The Galah flew away as the Hooded Plover charged. The only published record of the reaction of waders to Galahs that we could find was that of Inland Dotterels *Charadrius australis*, which crouched when Galahs landed among them (MacLean 1976).

The response of the Galahs to the nest-defence behaviour by Little Terns was to hop around the nest (with head down and wings raised), all the while staying clear of the Tern's bill. During this behaviour the Galahs occasionally head-bobbed. We did not observe such nest-defence behaviour prompt the Galah to leave a nest-site. However, Little Terns have been observed mobbing Galahs into retreat when defending a nest containing a newly hatched chick (Rose 1997). Galahs have also been observed in flight, screeching, being hotly pursued by Little Terns (A.J. Murray pers. comm.). On the other hand, Red-capped Plovers successfully initiated the retreat of the Galah from near the nest, although the Galah often made another approach. The Galah's retreat from the Red-capped Plover nest involved backward hops with the wings extended.

Discussion

Our observations at Mallacoota showed that some interactions between Galahs and nesting Charadriiformes (Little Terns, Red-capped and Hooded Plovers) were undoubtedly inadvertent encounters resulting from the Galahs' foraging activities, but some were not. Galahs are renowned for their play behaviour (McNaught & Garradd 1992, Reid 1994), and it is possible that they were simply playing. Interspecific play behaviour has been noted in wild animals, including between species of birds (Fagan 1981), but in this case the possible play behaviour of the Galahs would have constituted harassment of the nesting Charadriiformes. Galahs have also been recorded disturbing roosting Black-faced Woodswallows *Artamus cinereus* (Stokes & Hermes 1979), but there was no indication whether this was deliberate.

Rose's (1997) observations, near Forster, N.S.W., of Galahs being mobbed by Little Terns and their possible implication in the disappearance of newly hatched Little Tern chicks there, together with our observations at Mallacoota, indicate the potential for Galahs to interfere with the breeding of threatened Charadriiformes.

Acknowledgements

We thank the Victorian Department of Natural Resources and Environment and Andrew Murray, John Peter and Ian Rowley for constructive comments on a draft.

References

- Anon. (1993), Results of the 1992/93 Little Tern (*Sterna albifrons*) Breeding Season in East Gippsland, report of Natural Resources & Environment Victoria, Bairnsdale.
- Ashton, C.B. & Black, A.B. (1997), 'Birds of Aldinga Reef and the adjacent beach of Aldinga Bay', *South Aust. Ornithologist* 32, 128-131.
- Bransbury, J. (1991), Biology and Behaviour of Hooded Plovers, Report to Dept Environment & Planning, S.A.
- Egan, K. & Smith, G.C. (1994), 'Little Terns in Botany Bay', *Corella* 18, 47-48.
- Fagan, R. (1981), *Animal Play Behaviour*, Oxford University Press, New York.

- Garnett, S.T. (1993), Threatened and Extinct Birds of Australia, Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union Report 82.
- Jones, B. (1995), 'Breeding birds at Wallagoot Lake', *Aust. Birds* 29, 10-12.
- MacLean, G.L. (1976), 'A field study of the Australian Dotterel', *Emu* 76, 207-215.
- McNaught, R.H. & Garrard, G. (1992), 'On Galahs and vortices', *Emu* 92, 248-249.
- Owen, R. (1990), A Report on the Management of Little Terns (*Sterna albifrons*) in the Bairnsdale Region During the 1989/90 Breeding Season, Dept Conservation, Forests & Lands, Bairnsdale.
- (1991), A Report on the Management of Little Terns (*Sterna albifrons*) in the Bairnsdale Region During the 1990/91 Breeding Season, Dept Conservation, Forests & Lands, Bairnsdale.
- Reid, J. (1994), 'Galahs play in a willy-willy in the Northern Territory', *Emu* 94, 221-222.
- Reside, J. (1988), A Report on the Management of Little Terns (*Sterna albifrons*) in East Gippsland During the 1987/88 Breeding Season, unpubl. report to Dept Conservation, Forests & Lands, Bairnsdale.
- , Willoughby, L. & Whillance, L. (1989), A Report on the Management of Little Terns (*Sterna albifrons*) in East Gippsland During the 1988/89 Breeding Season, report to Dept Conservation, Forests & Lands, Victoria.
- Rose, A.B. (1994), 'Predation of Little Terns by Whimbrels', *Aust. Birds* 28, 1-4.
- (1997), 'Notes on the diet of some parrots in New South Wales', *Aust. Bird Watcher* 17, 134-137.
- Rowley, I. (1990), *The Behavioural Ecology of the Galah*, Surrey Beatty, Sydney.
- Stokes, T. & Hermes, N. (1979), 'Cluster roosting in the Black-faced Woodswallow', *Emu* 79, 84-86.

Received 11 February 1997

