

Report

Robbing of eggs from Roseate Tern and Sooty Tern colony, Darakasi, Watamu

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Summary

On 18th August 2011, during a visit to the Mawe ya Tumu islands just north of Darakasi, Watamu to confirm and survey a breeding colony of several hundred Roseate & Sooty Terns, five boys from Watamu were found having just climbed up onto the islands / rocks where the terns are nesting. They were carrying a large bag that clearly contained terns eggs – though they refused to show us saying they “were shells that belonged to someone else”. The bag contained and estimated 300 eggs. Upon surveying the islands, very few birds were observed sitting on eggs despite there being a lot of suitable habitat for nesting. Other reports have since been received of children stealing eggs from the islands on the 17th August. It would appear that the breeding attempt of the terns has been destroyed by the illegal collection of eggs.

Detail

For many years it has been known that Roseate Terns *Sterna dougallii* breed most years on Whale Island at the mouth of Mida Creek, Watamu, (Zimmerman et al. 1996) together with a small population of Sooty Tern *S. fuscata*. It has also been noted that on almost alternate years the birds do not breed here – and it has been a puzzle as to where they do breed. 2011 is one of these years and on 8th August 2011 I was called by Corporal Said of KWS Watamu saying he was on the beach at Darakasi and could see a cloud of birds over the far northern group of islands along the reef known as “Mawe ya Tumu”. I was able to go with him on 11th to confirm from the beach with a telescope that indeed there were c.1,000+ Roseate Terns and c.100 Sootys on and over the island. However it was early evening and I could not be sure that the birds were not just coming in to roost in the evening and planned to return to confirm breeding by walking over at low tide.

On 18th August I arrived just before low tide c.12:30pm with some volunteers at the Darakasi beach and looking out at the islands saw once again a good number of birds over them. However we also noted that there were 4-5 people climbing up one of the islands with the birds showing a high level



Egg thieves at base of breeding islands

of agitation around them. We walked out as fast as possible to the island but while we were still 2-300m away the five boys, as they turned out to be, had got off the island and were making their way back towards Watamu.

When we met them, they were carrying two fresh clam shells and one had a shirt which had been turned into a bag and which was bulging with what could be seen to

be small round objects (circled in white on adjacent image). Upon greeting them and asking what they had in the bag, they refused to show me instead saying they were shells that belonged to someone else. The boy carrying it tried to give it to another who refused and the one with it then skirted around us and they all five then took off running towards Watamu. Putting two and two together, the 'bag' was loaded with terns eggs – at an estimate probably c.300.



The only part of the islands which had terns still on nests in any number

It was clear that pretty much the whole colony had been cleared out of eggs.

On reaching the islands and studying them from the ground around them, we could only see c.50 to a maximum of 100 birds that could have been sitting on eggs. Many were perching on top of the low *Salvadora* bushes and there was 2-300 going to sit on the sand bank not far from the islands. There was, however, a good amount of grass and open habitat that would have been perfect nesting habitat from what I know them to use on Whale Island – and yet there were no

Confirmation that this was not the first time came from a reliable report from someone who saw children with terns eggs on 16th August. A beach operator at Darakasi had also previously told us that people went out there and stole the eggs. This incident we witnessed was not the first occasion though would be one of the last opportunities as there were very few nests left to rob.

The eggs by this time of the season would be too far developed to be edible as eggs as chicks should be hatching by the end of August. It is assumed therefore that the boys were selling them to tourists in Watamu – and indeed there is a 2nd or 3rd hand report from a beach operator that tourists were seen purchasing eggs at some point.

Recommended Action

Clearly the islands need immediate and effective protection if any birds are to successfully raise any young this year. It is best if the local community and reserve users can take a lead on this which will require awareness raising with the key community leaders. It is also important that KWS, as the official guardian of the wildlife and reserve takes a lead in ensuring the protection of the colony.

It is therefore recommended:

- Call and address a community meeting / baraza with key community members / groups to raise awareness about the importance of protecting the birds & to find a solution

- Visit schools in and around Watamu to teach children the importance of caring for wildlife, including birds
- KWS or a community group patrol the islands daily over low tide during the remainder of the breeding season (until early October)
- A notice be erected on the islands informing the public that the islands are off limits without express permission from the Warden, Marine Park.

References

Zimmerman, D. A., D. A. Turner, D. J. Pearson, I. Willis, and H. D. Pratt. 1996. Birds of Kenya and northern Tanzania. Princeton University Press.



Sooty Tern



Roseate Tern on Mawe ya Tumu

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