SPECIES INFORMATION SHEET *Gelochelidon nilotica*

English name: **Gull-billed tern**	Scientific name: ***Gelochelidon nilotica***	
Taxonomical group: Class: Aves Order: Charadriiformes Family: Sternidae	Species authority: Gmelin, 1789	
Subspecies, Variations, Synonyms: –	Generation length: 9 years	
Past and current threats (Habitats Directive article 17 code): Changes in agricultural management (A02), Alien species (I01), Competition and predation (I02)	Future threats (Habitats Directive article 17 codes): Tourism (G01), Alien species (I01), Competition and predation (I02), Unknown (U)	
IUCN Criteria: –	**HELCOM Red List Category:**	**RE Regionally Extinct**
Global / European IUCN Red List Category (BirdLife International 2004) LC / VU (A2b)	Annex I EU Birds Directive-yes Annex II EU Birds Directive-no	
Protection and Red List status in HELCOM countries: *Subject of special conservation measures in the EU Member states (Birds Directive, Annex I)* Denmark: CR, Estonia: NA, Finland: –, Germany: 1 (Critically endangered), Latvia: –, Lithuania: –, Poland: –, Russia: –, Sweden: –		

Range description and general trends

The main breeding area of the gull-billed tern is South- and South-East Europe. In North-Western Europe, there is only a small breeding population at the German and Danish North Sea coast. During the 20th century, this "cimbric" population has moved its range towards the south, *i.e.* from the Danish towards the German coasts. The population has been declining from 400–500 bp around 1950 to 20–60 bp currently (Berndt *et al.* 2002; Mauscherning *et al.* 2011). In Denmark, it has become an irregular breeder during the last years (2 bp in 2005, 1 bp in 2009–2011, Nyegaard & Grell 2006; Nyegaard & Willemoes 2010; Eskildsen & Vikstrøm 2011). At the German North Sea coast, the population has been fluctuating between 19 and 61 breeding pairs between 2001 and 2010 (Mauscherning *et al.* 2011).

Gelochelidon nilotica. Photos by Erich Hoyer (left) and Martin Grimm (right).

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Distribution and status in the Baltic Sea region

At the **German** Baltic coast, the gull-billed tern has been a rare breeding bird in the lagoon areas west of Rügen during the first half of the 19th century. There are breeding records documented for the island Liebes during the years 1818–1839. The species bred only with few pairs and obviously not in all years. Many of the breeding birds have been shot and clutches collected for scientific collections (Brehm & Schilling 1822). In 1880, the gull-billed tern bred again at the German Baltic coast, this time at the southern spit of the island Hiddensee. However, this clutch also has been destroyed (Koske 1919).

In **Denmark**, before 1970 gull-billed terns regularly bred in 5 to 7 colonies in the Limfjord area, 3 to 4 colonies on the island of Læsø and surrounding islets, and one colony in Mariager Fjord. During the 1970s, the species declined markedly. The last known breeding in the Baltic took place on Læsø in 1982 (Møller 1975, Rasmussen & Fischer 1997).

During the last 10 years one or two stray pairs have been seen now and then near some of the old Baltic breeding sites, and breeding has been suspected in a few cases. However, although likely, breeding was never substantiated.

Habitat and ecology

The species breeds in colonies on lakes, marshes and at the coast. The “cimbric” population prefers coastal breeding sites, such as islands or dyke forelands, close to fresh or brackish water surfaces. The former breeding sites in the Baltic Sea area have been small islands with low grass vegetation. The gull-billed tern feeds on insects taken in flight, and also often hunts over wetlands to take earthworms and insects, but also amphibians, small mammals and birds. The wintering areas are situated in tropical Africa.

Description of major threats

Reasons for the decline and range shifts of the “cimbric” population are probably losses and degeneration of feeding habitats due to the intensification of agricultural management. Reduction of food availability due to pesticide application is claimed as an impact factor for both breeding and wintering areas. There are also indications that elevated mortality due to accumulation of toxic substances may play a role. Disturbances and predation (especially by Foxes and other predatory mammals) could lead to abandonment of breeding sites. Climate and weather phenomena (wet or extremely hot periods during the breeding season, flood events) can (with increasing trend?) affect the reproduction success (Hälterlein 1998).

Assessment justification

Since there haven’t been breeding records in the Baltic Sea area for almost 30 years, the species is classified as *Regionally Extinct* (RE).

Recommendations for actions to conserve the species

The north-western European (“cimbric”) population has disappeared from the Baltic and strongly declined in the core areas in the Wadden Sea, where it is at the verge of extinction. The remaining population numbers are low (less than 50 bp in recent years) and the reproduction success is poor. There are no signs of the recovery of the population; a re-colonization of the Baltic Sea area cannot be expected. Hence, conservation actions for the species have to focus on the breeding sites in the Wadden Sea; for the Baltic Sea area, they are not meaningful.

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Common names

Denmark: Sandterne, Estonia: Naerutiir, Finland: Hietatiira, Germany: Lachseeschwalbe, Latvia: Kāpu zīriņš, Lithuania: kirasnapė žuvėdra, Poland: rybitwa krótkodzioba, Russia: Чайконосая крачка, Sweden: Sandtärna

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