

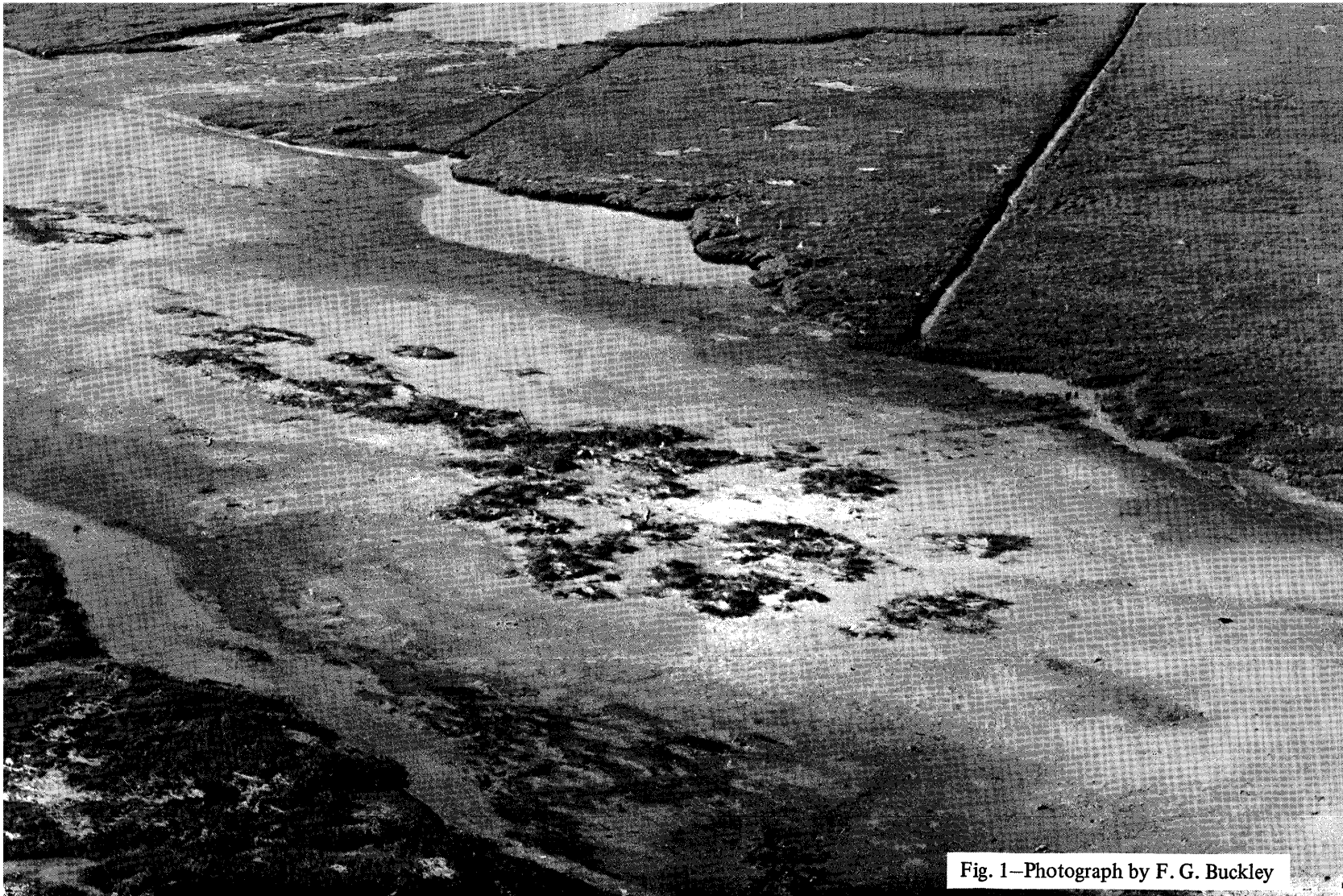


Fig. 1—Photograph by F. G. Buckley

GULL-BILLED TERN: NEW YORK STATE'S NEWEST BREEDING SPECIES

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On 11 June 1975, while in the third day of a helicopter survey of breeding waterbirds along the entire coastline of Long Island, we were passing over the cut made by the Wantagh sewage treatment plant's ocean outfall pipe, just before it reaches the north side of the Jones Beach strip, when one of us noticed what appeared to be a new tern colony on the exposed fill covering the pipe (Fig. 1). While we were circling for a closer look, it became apparent that one of the birds in the air was a Gull-billed Tern (*Geochelidon nilotica*). We set down as far from the site as possible, and waited for the birds to return, which they quickly did. Soon two pairs of adult Gull-bills settled on the sand (Fig. 2) and began to preen. Examination of the ground in the colony revealed about 30 pairs of Commons and a dozen pairs of Black Skimmers, although not all had nests or eggs. We were unable to identify a Gull-bill nest, although we were by now certain we had found their breeding area. The Gull-bills finally walked behind some grass, and then all we could see was a single head—looking for all the world like that of any incubating tern. Setting up a scope, PAB watched while FGB and MG walked straight to the spot. Up went the Gull-bills and there was a nest with two buffy, spotted eggs, slightly larger and more globular than those of a Common (Fig. 3). New York State's first known breeding by Gull-billed Tern was now a fact.

While the second pair did not have a nest on 11 June, it was located soon thereafter by T. H. Davis, A. J. and Brook Lauro. Word of the discovery was intentionally kept to a minimum to avoid unnecessary disturbance of the two pairs. Nonetheless they were disturbed, being visited sometimes both days of a weekend by birders eager to see or to photograph their first New York Gull-bills. The situation was exacerbated, despite the seemingly remote, access-by-boat-only, location, when on 4 July, New York State's first Long-billed Curlew in some 40 years was discovered nearby (see page 232). As hordes of birders began to fan out to explore this rich marshland, some inadvertently blundered onto the Gull-bill nest site; others were taken there "if they promised not to tell anyone." Despite all the harassment, both eggs in the first nest did hatch (Fig. 4) and at least

two chicks did fledge, the flying young being seen during August several times at nearby Tobay Pond and at least once as far away as Oak Beach Marsh, about 11 miles to the east. Apparently the second pair was unable to fledge any young; indeed they may not even have hatched any of their eggs, as PAB found one intact, abandoned Gull-bill egg at the nest site 26 July, and no one ever saw more than two juveniles. We feel it is abundantly clear that this failure can be laid squarely on the doorstep of interfering birders.

Long Island is now the northernmost edge of the Gull-bill's East Coast breeding range. There is no evidence to indicate that this is a recolonization of a former 18th or 19th century range; that probably ended, irregularly, in southern New Jersey. Writing in 1955, Fables (*Annotated List of New Jersey Birds*, 95 pp, publ. by the Urner Ornithological Club, Newark Museum, Newark, N.J. 07104) noted only a 1926 breeding at Stone Harbor and one seen after the 1944 hurricane. He missed a 1949 observation. The *First Supplement to the Annotated List of New Jersey Birds* (1959, 13 pp, publ. by the Urner Ornithological Club) called it "regular, but very uncommon, since 1954," and recorded a possible/probable breeding at Stone Harbor in 1954, a nest with eggs at Somer's Point in 1958, and later that same summer a family group at Beach Haven Inlet. Since about 1959 one or more pairs has summered at Brigantine National Wildlife Refuge almost every year, although we are uncertain if any nests have ever been found there. Adults feeding flying young have been observed there and at numerous other southern New Jersey localities, and while this is perhaps likely proof of nearby breeding, it is by no means certain. Single nests were found in 1963 at Atlantic City (opposite Brigantine NWR) and at Stone Harbor. By 1971 the southern New Jersey population had reached some 13 nests along the Avalon Causeway, and in late July 1975 a group of 25+ adults and young at Brigantine NWR suggested another productive year.

Writing in 1923, Griscom (*Birds of the New York City Region* 400 pp, publ. by the American Museum of Natural History, New York, N.Y. 10024) knew of no Long Island reports since 1885, but in 1942 Cruickshank (*Birds Around New York City*, 489 pp, publ. by the American Museum of Natural History) could add seven from the 1930's, all but one from Long Island, all in August or September, and several storm-associated. After the '30's, one in 1949 and another in 1950 were all for Long Island until two were seen after Hurricane Edna in 1954, following which one late-lingerer stayed until 29 No-



Fig. 2—Photograph by T. H. Davis



Fig. 3—Photograph by P. A. Buckley

vember. In 1956 a pair of adults feeding one juvenile capable of flight was seen at Moriches Inlet for a week following 26 July, but actual breeding on Long Island could not be proved. In September 1960 some 28 were blown onto Long Island by Hurricane Donna, 16 at Jones Inlet alone. The following year two singles were apparently associated with Hurricane Esther. In 1962, one was seen briefly in June at South Amboy, N.J. and in October on the Hackensack Meadows—still the only N.Y.C. area report away from the ocean-front. Then came a hiatus, with no N.Y.C. region reports until 1968



Fig. 4—Photograph by T. H. Davis

when a pair frequented Oak Beach Marsh and a nearby ternery from early June until late July, although only adults were seen. In 1969 a pair of adults that appeared to be prospecting, spent two days in a ternery on the Loop Causeway, but none was seen anywhere in the region in 1970 or 1971. In 1972 singles were seen at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge 19 May and 8 July; in 1973, singles were at Tobay Pond 5 June and 15-27 September; but in 1974 there was only one report, a bird at Jamaica Bay 18 May. Doubtless significantly, the 1975 breeding on Long Island was heralded by a veritable invasion of Gull-bills: three arrived at Jamaica Bay 16 May, soon increased to

five, and remained in varying numbers until at least mid-July. One pair was even seen copulating, sparking a feverish but fruitless boat search of all bay marshes and islands. On 18 May a pair was flushed from the ground in the Cedar Beach ternery, and shortly thereafter another (?) pair was seen in the colonies at West End Beach and at Loop Causeway. While these birds were seen only once at these locations despite much searching, they could have been the pairs whose nests were found in the marshes nearby in June. A single adult at Moriches Inlet 8 July is hard to relate to these birds.

In conclusion, we hope an object lesson is apparent in our comments about the disturbances visited on the first known nest site of Gull-bills in N.Y. and that a repeat performance by birders might thereby be avoided. It seems, as an aside, almost a small miracle that the year's other New York State breeding first—the Chuck-will's-widows at Oak Beach—also managed to fledge any young despite eager birders who “checked on their progress” almost daily. When will we learn?—

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