

LETTERS TO THE EDITORS

To the Editors,

I found Buckley's and Gochfeld's remark, "we feel it is abundantly clear that this failure [of the nesting Gull-billed Terns] can be laid squarely on the doorstep of interfering birders" (*Kingbird* 25: 180) an intemperate statement, highly neglectful of the facts.

Following the publication of the article containing this statement Paul Buckley told me that the phrase was composed and included by himself. Mr. Buckley lives in Massachusetts and after his discovery of the site only once revisited South Line Island. I live on Long Island and visited South Line Island June 14, 22, July 5, and 26. Further, I edit the New York Rare Bird Alert and was aware of many birders' visits to nearby North Line Island in search of the Long-billed Curlew.

It was wrong of the authors to state that birders disturbed the birds to "photograph their first N.Y. Gull-bills"—so far as I know, only the authors and myself obtained photographs of the adults, nest, or young. It was equally misleading to say that some birders "inadvertently blundered onto the Gull-bill nest site." I am not aware that this occurred, but I know that a few birders came quite close without ever realizing Gull-billed Terns were present.

In fact, it is a lack of visits to check the Gull-bill nestlings' progress that makes it difficult to accurately determine their success. On July 5 I found the first nest with a day-old chick (the one pictured in figure 4 of the article) and an intact egg, and the second nest contained two intact eggs. On July 8 Tom Burke and Hugh McGuinness found the first nest with "a downy young and an unhatched egg," and the second nest with two eggs. On July 9 Michael Gochfeld found the first nest with only a "2-3 day old young," and the second nest with two eggs. South Line Island was next visited on July 26 by separate parties of birders including Paul Buckley and myself. On that occasion Mr. Buckley found an "intact abandoned Gull-bill egg," but does not state whether the egg was removed, left at the nest site, or whatever. I arrived after Mr. Buckley's party departed and found both Gull-bill nest sites in a state of abandoned decay, both of them empty. A search of the nearby area failed to locate any young. The article implies that the "intact, abandoned" egg was removed from the second nest, while Mr. Buckley told me prior to publication that he wasn't certain which nest it came from. This is understandable, since Mr. Buckley had never seen the second nest site, and only saw the first on June 11. On July 30 Barbara Spencer visited South Line Island and saw two adult Gull-bills with two "almost fledged" young, but she did not approach the young birds closely enough to learn whether they were capable of flight.

From the above, it is fair to state that: 1—an egg apparently disappeared from the first nest between July 8-9. 2—it's not really clear where the "intact,

abandoned" egg was found. 3—the two young observed after July 26 were probably siblings. 4—South Line Island was not visited by birders between July 9–26. The above facts present a confusing story. Had someone familiar with the Gull-bills' nest sites visited South Line Island between July 9-26 the picture might have been clearer.

Mr. Buckley neglects the possibility that the nesting terns were disturbed by non-birders. On one visit I encountered a group of bathers, on another, a group of water skiers using the beach as a staging area. Several of these persons were observed walking toward, but not entering, the tern colony. In my experience, the unknowing (or uncaring) public is one of the chief causes of disturbance to Long Island gull, tern, and skimmer colonies. When dogs are allowed to enter a colony the threat escalates. Boaters often bring their pets along, and allow them to roam islands unleashed. Anthony J. Lauro visited South Line Island about 10 times during the summer in search of shorebirds, but only once visited the Gull-bill nest site with me. He estimated that non-birders were present on at least half his visits, and also saw dogs, but did not see anyone enter the colony during his brief stays. Another overlooked fact was the occurrence of severe thunderstorms and gale force winds at Jones Beach on July 13.

As a co-discoverer of New York's first nesting Chuck-will's-widows I took a proprietary interest in these birds. The Chuck-will's-widows' progress was not checked "almost daily" as Mr. Buckley suggests (see T. H. Davis, 1975. *Kingbird* 25: 132-137). If these birds had not been successful, and I thought this was due to birders' interference, I would have been annoyed. In this case however, the facts do not merit the harsh criticism of the birding community.

Sincerely,
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Letters may be of a general nature as long as they pertain to New York State ornithology, or may be of a specific nature with reference to something that has appeared in *The Kingbird*. The editors reserve the right *not* to accept a letter for publication, or to edit a letter in accordance with space requirements. All letters received will be acknowledged. Your participation is invited.