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*CAIN—Nesting of the Gull-billed Tern.*Nesting of the Gull-billed Tern (*Gelochelidon nilotica*).

By W. Cain, Port Augusta.

The Gull-billed Tern was found nesting in a colony at the Seepage Swamp, Yadlamalka Station, 50 miles north of Port Augusta, in November, 1932. The swamp was visited on 19th November, 1932. On arrival it was noticed that one island was covered with birds. As we approached this island from the west, where the water was three feet deep, the birds all took flight and came flying overhead snapping their beaks, screeching, and swooping down to within a few feet of us. This was continued until we left the island when the birds settled down again. The nesting island was approximately 60 x 22 yards, and the crown was about 15 inches above the water level. All the nests were in a confined area on the crown of the island. The nest construction varied, some were mere depressions, others were ringed with twigs, which were covered with the excavated soil, giving the nest an elevated appearance. The nests were placed irregularly, some only 15 inches apart, whilst others were up to three feet apart. There were 69 nests, 42 of which contained eggs (35 with two eggs each and 7 with one egg each). Several of the nests were empty, the larger chicks having taken to the water on our landing on the island. The smaller chicks just cowered down flat with neck outstretched. Several of the latter were eating lizards, and had them eaten at various stages, some had just the head in their bill, whilst others had the reptile in their throat. They seemed to take small gulps, and with each gulp the lizard went farther down. Surrounding the nests

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were balls of chick excreta\*, about  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch diameter, composed solely of clean reptilian bones held together by some sticky substance, which was hard and dry. The nesting birds with chicks kept coming to the water from the scrub with lizards in their bills, and we noted them as far as four miles from the swamp skimming over the scrub after the manner of the Spotted Harrier (*Circus assimilis*) and striking when their objective was seen. The adult birds did not appear to make any use of the insect life from the water, and there were some fish in the swamp up to  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches in length. The stomach contents of the bird skinned for identification were fully developed maggots, probably taken from dead rabbits lying around the swamp. The eggs, with regard to colour, size, and shape, were representative of North's description ("Nests and Eggs," etc., Vol. IV., p. 308):—"The eggs are oval, swollen oval, or elongate oval in form, some specimens being rather pointed at the smaller end, the shell being cross-grained, dull in some, in others slightly lustrous. They vary from buffy-white to whity-brown and pale coffee-brown to greenish-grey and light olive-green, over which is distributed irregular-shaped spots of rich umber-brown and brownish-black, with which are intermingled faint underlying markings of inky-grey; others have small rounded spots and blotches, with here and there irregular streaks of various shades of umber-brown with the same underlying bluish-grey markings; not a few have the markings consisting of short wavy streaks, lines or scratches of various shades of umber-brown and brownish-black, and similar underlying dull bluish or inky-grey markings, particularly on the thicker end, where they become confluent and form a zone of interlaced streaks and lines. This variety, of a light olive-green ground colour, closely resembles some eggs of the Silver Gull (*Larus novae-hollandiae*)." A feature was the disparity in colour, size and length of the two eggs in the one nest in several instances. The water in the approaches to the island from the north and east was very shallow, 9 inches in the deepest spots, while in many places the ground was showing. As several new nests were in course of excavation it was evident that the birds had no conception of their danger from foxes from the fast-receding water.

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\*Mr. H. M. Hale, Director of the South Australian Museum, who examined some balls sent down, stated that the contents were "tiny grass seeds and fragments of exoskeletons of various insects; bones of the Earless Dragon (*Tympanocryptis lineatus* Peters). Madigan found this lizard right out on Lake Eyre, the only terrestrial vertebrate in the area."—Editors.

We visited the island again on 26th. November, and found that the foxes had cleaned up the place, and not a bird was on the island. On investigation we dug up 13 eggs and 5 dead chicks. All the eggs were heavily incubated, the foxes having eaten the fresher ones. Two of the excavated eggs had squeaking chicks, and were probably buried only the previous night. With the destruction of their nests the sitting birds must have simultaneously left the district, as approximately only 60 birds were left, and these all seemed to be feeding chicks floating about the water or on bits of islands or some hiding in bushes in the water. On 19th November it was estimated that there were at least 300 adult birds in the colony, and the larger chicks seen on that visit were considered to be 14 days old. The chicks examined were a drab colour with darker lines down the back; irides, bluish; beak, yellowy brown to coffee-brown at the base; legs and feet, yellow, turning to dirty black near the webs; head, abnormally large, and no sign of the black colour on top.

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