

# GULL-BILLED TERN

SCIENTIFIC NAME: **chelidon nilotica**

CONSERVATION STATUS: **Least Concern (LC)**

## FACT FILE

- ORDER: Charadriiformes
- FAMILY: Laridae
- DIET: Insects small fish amphibians
- WINGSPAN: 85–105 cm
- LENGTH: 33–43 cm
- WEIGHT: 200–300 g
- Ground nesting colonial breeder
- Migratory wintering in Africa
- Strong direct flight
- Hunts mostly over land

**S**carce and localised breeder in southern France. At first glance it looks like a typical tern — slim pale and sharp-winged above a glittering lagoon. But watch closely and it refuses to behave like one. Instead of plunge-diving for fish this bird quarters low over marsh and meadow, scanning the ground with deliberate intent. The Gull-billed Tern is a hunter of land as much as water, a coastal bird that thinks like a marsh predator. In the wetlands of the Camargue within the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur it breeds in small colonies on open islets and sparsely vegetated saltmarsh. It requires bare ground for nesting and rich feeding areas nearby — lagoons brackish pools damp grassland and dry steppe edges all within reach.



# A WETLAND TERN OF MEDITERRANEAN LAGOONS

## NOT YOUR TYPICAL TERN

Most terns are specialists of the sea, hovering then plunging headfirst into water. The Gull-billed Tern rarely does this. Instead it captures large insects such as grasshoppers and beetles, as well as small fish tadpoles and even tiny reptiles. It picks prey from the surface or snatches it mid-air, flying with a steady buoyant motion rather than dramatic dives.

Its strong black bill is slightly heavier than that of other terns, reflecting this broader diet. The head in breeding season shows a neat black cap above pale grey upperparts and clean white underparts. Broad wings and a measured wingbeat give it a purposeful silhouette.



# A METHODOICAL HUNTER OF BOTH MARSHES AND DRY GRASSLANDS

## LIFE ON THE EDGE OF WATER

Breeding begins in late spring. Nests are simple scrapes in sand shell grit or dry mud, sometimes only a few metres apart. Two or three eggs are laid and both adults share incubation duties. Colonies are often mixed with other waterbirds, adding to the constant noise and motion of the marsh. The chicks rely on camouflage and stillness. Their mottled down blends perfectly with the ground. Any disturbance can expose them to heat predation or trampling, making stable undisturbed nesting sites essential. By late summer the birds disperse southwards, travelling to Africa for the winter months before returning the following spring.

## BUILT FOR OPEN LANDSCAPES

This species depends on a mosaic: shallow water for feeding, dry open ground for nesting and surrounding grassland rich in invertebrates. Changes in water levels loss of open islets or excessive disturbance can quickly reduce breeding success. Because colonies are small local impacts can have disproportionate effects.



## DID YOU KNOW?

The species name **nilotica** refers to the Nile region, where early naturalists first described the bird.

Despite this, it breeds across several continents from Europe to Asia and the Americas.