

SLENDER-BILLED GULL

SCIENTIFIC NAME: **Chroicocephalus genei**

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

FACT FILE

- ORDER: Charadriiformes
- FAMILY: Laridae
- LENGTH: 37–40 cm
- WINGSPAN: 90–102 cm
- WEIGHT: 200–300 g
- Colonial ground nester
- Breeds in coastal lagoons and salt pans
- Migratory within the Mediterranean basin
- Diet: Small fish crustaceans marine invertebrates



Refined, pale and long-necked, the Slender-billed Gull challenges the usual image of a gull. It lacks the heavy build and opportunistic habits of its larger relatives. Instead it is a bird of open saline water, tightly bound to Mediterranean lagoons and salt pans where light, wind and shallow water shape its world. In the basins of the Salins d'Hyères within the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, this species breeds on low exposed islands of mud and shell. These artificial saltworks now replicate the natural lagoon systems that once dominated Mediterranean coasts, providing feeding shallows and predator-buffered nesting sites — when carefully managed.



LOCALISED BREEDING SPECIES IN SOUTHERN FRANCE

IDENTIFICATION AND STRUCTURE

The key to recognising the Slender-billed Gull lies in proportion rather than pattern. It has a noticeably elongated neck, a gently sloping forehead and a fine slightly downcurved bill. The body appears slim and buoyant, often recalling a tern in silhouette.

In breeding plumage the underparts develop a subtle pink flush, visible in strong light. Unlike the Black-headed Gull, it lacks a dark hood, instead showing a pale head with a faint smudge behind the eye. In flight the wings appear long and elegant with clean pale underwings.

FEEDING BEHAVIOUR

This is not a rubbish-tip gull. The Slender-billed Gull feeds primarily in shallow saline water, walking or swimming as it picks small fish, crustaceans and aquatic invertebrates from the surface. It may dip forward or briefly submerge its bill but rarely performs dramatic dives. Flocks often move methodically across lagoons, responding to changes in water level and salinity that influence prey availability. Feeding success is closely tied to water management in coastal wetlands.

A LAGOON SPECIALIST RATHER THAN A GENERALIST SCAVENGER, IT DEPENDS ON SHALLOW SALINE WATER AND CAREFULLY BALANCED WATER LEVELS.

COLONIAL BREEDING

Breeding begins in late spring when birds gather in dense colonies on bare ground. Nests are shallow scrapes placed only a short distance apart. The exposed setting offers visibility against predators but leaves eggs vulnerable to flooding, trampling or disturbance.

Chicks hatch well camouflaged and quickly leave the nest scrape, forming loose crèches under the watch of multiple adults. Because colonies are often small and geographically isolated, local breeding success can significantly influence regional populations.

A MEDITERRANEAN NETWORK

The Slender-billed Gull breeds in scattered colonies around the Mediterranean basin, the Black Sea and parts of western Asia. Southern France lies close to the north-western edge of its breeding range. After the breeding season birds disperse along Mediterranean coasts and estuaries, remaining closely associated with marine and brackish environments. Unlike more generalist gulls, it rarely penetrates far inland.

SALTPANS AND CONSERVATION

Managed saltworks such as those at Hyères now play an important ecological role. Controlled water levels create a mosaic of shallow basins and exposed islands that support breeding gulls, terns and waders. Without this management many nesting sites would disappear through vegetation growth or tidal change. The Slender-billed Gull therefore reflects the complex relationship between traditional industry and wildlife conservation along Mediterranean coasts.

