THE PAST STATUS OF GULLS AND TERNS IN BRITAIN

HET VOORKOMEN VAN ENKELE MEEUWEN EN STERNS IN GROOT BRITTANNIË IN HET VERLEDEN

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Als een reactie op artikelen van Eigenhuis (1996) en Dijksen (1996) over het mogelijke voorkomen van broedende mantelmeeuwen in Nederland in het verleden, wordt de historische informatie over het voorkomen van meeuwen en sterns op de Britse Eilanden besproken. Er bestaan aanwijzingen waaruit het voorkomen van verschillende soorten kan worden afgeleid, vooral op basis van vangstgegevens en informatie over de consumptie van gevogelte in de Middeleeuwen. Helaas wordt in de literatuur een groot aantal verschillende (locale) namen gebruikt voor de verschillende vogelsoorten, waardoor het dikwijls moeilijk is om precies uit te maken waar het nu feitelijk om gaat. Het lijkt er echter op dat voor de drooglegging van de meeste moerassen een soort als de Kokmeeuw buitengewoon talrijk was en dat jonge dieren werden gevangen om in gevangenschap te worden vetgemest voor menselijke consumptie. De grotere meeuwensoorten werden eveneens gewaardeerd om hun vlees, maar deze soorten waren kennelijk niet zo ruim voorhanden. Sterns werden zelden vermeld als luxe vorm van 'broodbeleg' en hun eventuele talrijkheid is uit dergelijke bronnen daarom niet goed af te leiden. Er zijn echter aanwijzingen dat behalve de Zwarte Stern ook de Lachstern vroeger op de Britse Eilanden heeft gebroed en het lijkt aannemelijk, maar ditmaal vooral op geografische grond, dat ook de Reuzenstern hier vroeger als broedvogel voorkwam.

The suggestion by Eigenhuis (1996) that black-backed gulls *Larus fuscus/marinus* may have bred on Texel in the past before they recolonised The Netherlands in this century, although questioned by Dijksen (1996), relates to an interesting subject, the original distribution of the Laridae in northwest Europe, and it may be useful to provide a British perspective.

It seems obvious from their habits and ecology that before the extensive intervention of man after the last glaciation both the gulls and terns must have bred much more widely than they do now. It also seems likely that the first impact of human activity on primeval seabird populations must have been severe, because the birds would have provided an easily-exploited

source of food when it was scarce after the winter. Fowling clearly played an important part in the early human economy (Clark 1948, Baldwin 1974), but unfortunately, while all the commoner existing resident gulls have been recorded in British archeological deposits (Fisher 1966), and quite commonly where these have been investigated most thoroughly in Orkney (Smith 1984), they have seldom been identified correctly.

It was a long time before anything was recorded in writing. By the time written records begin many large birds were evidently already scarce, and together with the most entertaining means of catching them, falconry, reserved for the aristocracy. Indeed, Newton (1869) attributed their survival to the game laws regulating the exploitation. The first quantitative information about bird status comes from records of the receipt and consumption of game, notably at feasts, as with the 11 000 wild birds including 4000 Mallards *Anas platyrhrynchos* and Teals *A. crecca*, 2400 Rees (Scolopacidae?), 1200 Quails *Coturnix coturnix*, 1000 Egrittes (discussed later), 500 Partridges *Perdix perdix*, 400 Woodcocks *Scolopax rusticola*, 400 Plovers (Charadriidae?), 400 Heronshawes *Ardea* sp., 204 Cranes *Grus grus*, 204 Bittors *Botaurus stellaris*, 200 Fessauntes *Phasianus colchicus* and 100 Curlews *Numenius* sp. reputedly eaten at the installation of Lord Chancellor Neville as Archbishop of York on 22-23 September 1465 (Gurney 1921).

It is notable that gulls and terns, even under the ancient names maew and staern already used in the Anglo-Saxon poem 'The Seafarer' in the seventh century (Gurney 1921, Fisher 1966), do not appear in these lists until the sixteenth century, by which time it was already an established practice to catch young Black-headed Gulls *Larus ridibundus*, then known as Puitts, Pewits or Seamews, and fatten them for the table (Gurney 1921). Presumably they must previously have been known by some other name or names, and there is only one obvious candidate treated similarly and valued even more highly which disappeared when the Puitt appeared, the Brew(e), worth 18 pence in 1275, three times as much as a Curlew *Numenius arquata*. While it has been suggested it was the Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* or Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*, these seem unlikely to have been kept in captivity on such a scale. Since the Brewe is missing as well from the Neville list, it may also have been called the 'Egritte.

While evidently Black-headed Gulls swarmed in Britain before the great drainage programmes of the seventeenth century, this does not appear to apply to the larger Laridae, which would surely have been even more popular once they had been fed in captivity to fatten them and remove their fishy taste (Muffett 1655), but are seldom recorded. Further evidence for their

status is provided by the greatest feast of all, when the Kings Henry VIII of England and Francis I of France met the Count of Flanders at Calais on 20-24 October 1532 (Blatcher 1968, Bourne 1981). Not only does the total of 27 052 wild birds consumed here include 688 Brewes valued at 15 pence each, but also 912 Curlews, Bitterns, Shovelers *Platalea leucorodia* and gulls worth 18 pence, compared to 576 geese and 2784 Quails worth 4 pence and 5616 chickens worth a penny. Thus it seems likely that in proportion to their size, larger gulls were thought nearly as eatable as Brewes, but were scarcer.

Further evidence for the past rarity of the large gulls and their high rating as delicacies is provided by the papers of the subsequent Lord Deputy of Calais from 1533 to 1540, Lord Lisle (Byrne 1981). There seems to have been an illicit traffic in cagebirds from Calais to England, and people made special requests for 'mews' (letter 711). One also sent thanks for 'gulls and other pleasures', and sent a dozen 'good puffins' (which might have been either *Fratercula arctica* or *Puffinus puffinus*?) in exchange (letter 1095); it is an interesting reflection on sixteenth century life that eating a gull was then considered a pleasure. Lord and Lady Lisle would also sometimes include gulls as well as Brewes and Quails in presents (letters 516, 529, 971a), though only Brewes appear to have been considered good enough to soothe King Henry VIII after the execution of another of the recipients of these gifts, Queen Anne Bolyn (letters 698-9).

Thus judging by past lists of game, the small gulls which eat invertebrates may always have been common in Britain despite the capture of many of their young to be reared in captivity for the pot. The larger gulls may have remained scarce predators along the outer coasts prone to taste of fish until the introduction of the main bird protection legislation in the 1880s enabled them to take over the role of scavenger in cities formerly occupied by the kites *Milvus* sp. and Ravens *Corvus corax* (Gurney 1921) wiped out in the interests of game preservation. If the situation was the same in The Netherlands, it seems possible that while black-backed gulls may have bred in the remote past, they are unlikely to have done so again until they were protected in recent times.

While there is no evidence for losses of breeding gull species from Britain, where there have recently also been gains instead, there could have been more losses of breeding terns. Thus Montagu (1813) reports a supposed duplicate Sandwich Tern *Sterna sandvicensis* from Sussex sent to him by John Latham, who had recently described that species from Kent, was actually a Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica*, which he also described as a new species *Sterna anglica*, saying he knew of at least two other specimens from

Sussex, and thought it commoner than the Sandwich Tern in Britain, where it bred in 1950. It might also have been the Great Tern or Ticket seen with Pewit Gulls and vast flocks of the lost Black Tern *Chlidonias niger* in the East Fen of Cambridgeshire in 1768-69 by Pennant (1771), if it was not the Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia*, which in view of its equally wide distribution in similar habitats elsewhere also seems likely to have bred in Britain, and perhaps also The Netherlands, in the past?

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