

Nesting terns and gulls (Laridae) on the Selvagens Islands in 2023 and a brief review of past occurrence

Garajaus e gaivotas (Laridae) nidificantes nas Selvagens em 2023 e uma breve revisão do seu estatuto nestas ilhas

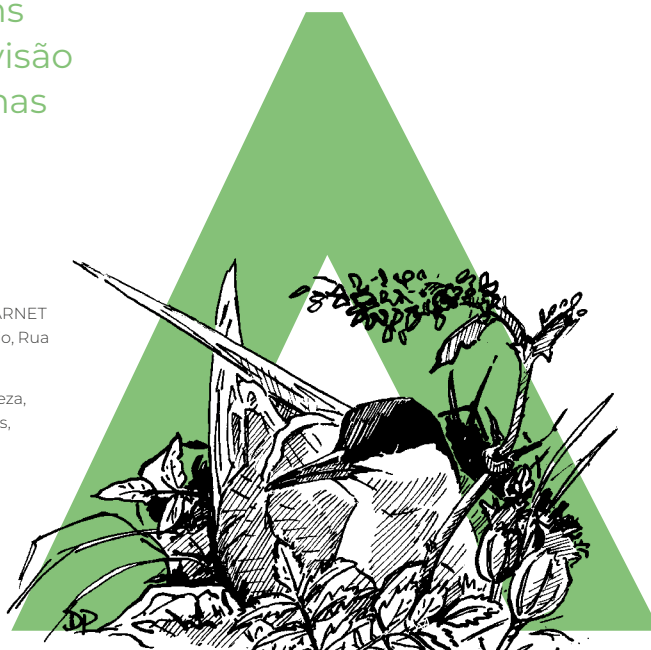
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ABSTRACT

The Selvagens islands comprise two Important Bird Areas. Despite considerable previous ornithological research, there has not been a comprehensive survey of terns and gulls during the peak nesting season. We counted yellow-legged-gulls *Larus michahellis* (25 pairs nesting on the three islands of the Selvagens) and common terns *Sterna hirundo* (20-25 pairs, nesting on Selvagem Pequena only) in April 2023. Historical records indicate that these species have been nesting on the Selvagens at least since the 19th century, but that their populations, despite being largely undisturbed, have always remained small, in contrast with the large populations of various petrels which nest there. Roseate terns *Sterna dougallii* and sooty terns *Onychoprion fuscatus* nest occasionally in very small numbers. The small populations of terns and gulls probably result from the small area of the shelf of the Selvagens, combined with the low productivity of the adjacent oceanic waters.

Keywords: *Sterna hirundo*, *Sterna dougallii*, *Larus michahellis*

RESUMO

As ilhas Selvagens compreendem duas Áreas Importantes para Aves. Apesar de terem sido extensivamente exploradas de um ponto de vista ornitológico, não houve até à data um levantamento abrangente de gaivotas e garajaus durante a época de nidificação. Contabilizámos 25 casais de gaivotas-de-patas-amarelas (*Larus michahellis*) nidificando nas três ilhas das Selvagens e 20-25 casais de garajaus-comuns (*Sterna hirundo*), nidificando apenas na Selvagem Pequena em abril de 2023. Registos históricos indicam que estas espécies têm nidificado nas Selvagens pelo menos desde o século XIX, mas as suas populações, apesar de bem protegidas, sempre permaneceram pequenas, contrastando com as grandes populações de outras aves marinhas ali existentes. Garajaus-rosados (*Sterna dougallii*) e garajaus-de-dorso-preto (*Onychoprion fuscatus*) nidificam ocasionalmente em números muito reduzidos. As pequenas populações de garajaus e gaivotas provavelmente resultam da reduzida superfície da plataforma das Selvagens, combinada com a baixa produtividade das águas oceânicas adjacentes, proporcionando escassos recursos tróficos para estas aves costeiras.

Palavras-chave: *Sterna hirundo*, *Sterna dougallii*, *Larus michahellis*

Introduction

The Selvagens Islands are classified as two Important Bird Areas, well-known for hosting some of the most important seabird colonies in Portugal and the North-east Atlantic (Meirinho et al 2014). There are few opportunities for ornithologists to visit the three islands of the Selvagens group during the peak breeding season of gulls and terns (Laridae). Hence, most censuses tend to be partial and incomplete, often carried out too late in the season. Here, we report on an expedition to the Selvagens which made possible visiting the three islands that compose this group and to carry out counts of nesting gulls and terns. We also briefly review the published information on nesting terns in the Selvagens.

of April 2023 (with preparatory work carried out in 25-27 April 2023). We attempted to locate as many nests of gulls as possible by watching the birds from a distance and searching in all favourable areas with gull presence. Gulls were not nesting colonially, but rather spread out through the islands. Several areas could only be assessed (for the presence of a pair) from a distance as they were inaccessible (sites on cliffs or in the middle of white-faced storm-petrel *Pelagodroma marina* colonies). Terns were nesting on Selvagem Pequena only, but the colony area was inaccessible due to the high density of petrel nests, hence their numbers were assessed from a distance.

Methods

We counted terns and gulls on Selvagem Pequena and Ilhéu de Fora on the 28th of April and on Selvagem Grande on the 29th

Results

We counted a total of 25 pairs of yellow-legged gulls *Larus michahellis* in the archipelago (7 on Selvagem Grande, 11 on Selvagem Pequena and 7 on Ilhéu de Fora).

Of 18 nests seen, 13 still had eggs (some pipping or just hatched) and 5 were empty but with signs of recent use (chicks had probably left recently, or eggs were predated). For the 7 other pairs the nests could not be located or accessed. On Ilhéu de Fora there was an adult lesser-black-backed gull *Larus fuscus* which might have been nesting, paired with a yellow-legged gull (one adult gull of this species was also present on Selvagem Pequena in 2010; Catry et al. 2010). There were 20-25 pairs of common terns *Sterna hirundo* apparently incubating on Selvagem Pequena, plus one pair without nest on Ilhéu de Fora.

Discussion

The past occurrence of yellow-legged gulls on Selvagens has been reviewed before (Matias & Catry 2010, Catry et al 2010). The species has been present in the archipelago since at least 1892, always in small numbers. These gulls are present on Selvagens all year round. The number of pairs for the Selvagens as a whole in 2023 is virtually identical to the one that can be deduced from estimates in 2007 and 2010 (Catry et al. 2010, Matias & Catry 2010). Gulls in these islands rely extensively on small petrels, crabs and land snails for food, apparently consuming few fish (Matias & Catry 2010, Catry et al. 2010).

Common terns were noted on Selvagem Grande and Selvagem Pequena in 1892 and in April 1895 (Schmitz 1893, Ogilvie Grant 1896;) and they were apparently nesting in the Madeiran archipelago at least since the mid-19th century (Harcourt 1855), possibly much earlier, as indicated by toponymy (e.g. Ponta do Garajau). In 1939 they were again confirmed to be present on Selvagens (Lockley 1952). Despite this long-term occupancy, the population of this summer visitor has always been small, as far as it is known. On Selvagem Pequena, there are records of numbers nesting in some years: unspecified “large numbers” in 1953 (Bacallado & Oromi

1978), 3 pairs (on Ilhéu de Fora only) in 1980 (den Hartog et al 1984), 10 pairs in 1981 (Swash 1986), no breeding (nor on Ilhéu de Fora) in 2004 (J. da Mata, pers. com.), ca 19 pairs in 2005, likely <10 pairs in 2010 (Catry et al 2010), ca. 20 pairs in 2016 (P. Catry, pers. obs.). In 1994, Zino & Bischoito mentioned that “Selvagem Pequena and Ilhéu de Fora normally have a total of 5-6 breeding pairs”, and also that at that time 3-4 pairs nested on Selvagem Grande, where we have not found them breeding at least since 2000 (Oliveira & Menezes 2004 and pers. obs.). Common terns still nest regularly on similar terrain on the Desertas Islands, for instance, so lack of breeding habitat is clearly not an issue on Selvagem Grande.

Roseate terns *Sterna dougalli* have also been noted on Selvagem Pequena on some occasions, but their presence does not seem to be regular. The only published records indicate 2 pairs nesting on Ilhéu de Fora in 1980 (den Hartog 1984), 3 pairs nesting on Selvagem Pequena in 1981 (Swash 1986) and 11 pairs on the same island in 1982 (Roux 1983). Two pairs were nesting in May 2016 (P. Catry, pers. obs.). The species seems to be at the edge of its Northeast Atlantic breeding distribution in the Selvagens, as it is a very scarce breeder in the Madeira archipelago, generally absent in the Canaries and further south, but quite common in the Azores (Martí & Del Moral 2003, Equipa Atlas 2008).

One pair of Sooty terns *Onychoprion fuscatus* (a tropical species) have also nested on Selvagem Pequena in 1982 (Roux 1983), with one individual still present in 2005 and 2010 (Catry et al. 2010).

It is interesting to note that the Selvagens are strictly protected and with virtually no disturbance (although there was limited culling of gulls on Selvagem Grande in the late 20th century only). It is particularly difficult to land at Ilhéu de Fora, thus this is only very rarely visited, while on Selvagem Pequena in the past 7 years there has been probably only

2-3 short day-visits during each breeding season, while from 1994 to 2016 there were reserve wardens present during the summer season. Further, Selvagem Grande has many cliff areas that are virtually never visited by humans. Despite this, the populations of terns and gulls remain very small, in contrast with the large populations of several petrels which sum to a total of well over 100,000 pairs (e.g. Zino & Bischoff 1994, Campos & Granadeiro 1999, Granadeiro et al. 2006, Catry et al. 2010). The small number of terns and gulls is probably related to the limited surface of the shelf of the Selvagens and the low productivity of the sea in the region (Romero et al. 2021), which means that birds that forage only a short-range around the colony, such as terns and gulls, have few food resources available for breeding.

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