

# The orange-billed Tern of l'Albufera de València in 2006

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*This text is aimed at gathering information during the identification process of an orange-billed tern that bred in l'Albufera de València, eastern Spain in 2006.*

An adult male orange-billed tern (*Sterna* sp.) paired with a female Sandwich Tern (*S. sandvicensis*) and reared one chick at l'Albufera de València (E Spain) in 2006.

The orange-billed tern was apparently recorded for the first time at the nesting site on 21 April 2006, although the first detailed observation at this site was made on 2 May. It was an adult wearing a metal ring at the right tarsus therefore it was supposed to be the same that nested in Delta de l'Ebre (NE Spain) during 2004 and 2005 seasons (see <http://www.rarebirdspain.net/arbsr507.htm#Selegans> for details).

The orange-billed tern was in full breeding plumage when first discovered and was paired with a female Sandwich Tern. Copulation was observed on 7 May and the pair attended a nest since 10 May. A single egg was laid (length 51.53 mm, width 36.37 mm) and hatching was recorded on 5 June. Both adults reared the chick until it was fully fledged by 10 July. They were last recorded at the nesting location on 14 July.

During the courtship and incubation period, single records of allegedly the same tern were made at neighbouring wetlands, such as Laguna de La Mata, Alicante (SE Spain) on 25 April (Jacobo Ramos, *pers. comm.*) and Delta de l'Ebre on 16 May (David Bigas, *pers. comm.*), both sites stretching about 200 km south and north of l'Albufera de València, respectively. It is interesting to note that the tern seemed absent from the nesting site in both dates.

Main features of the orange-billed tern recorded during the initial observations, in direct comparison with Sandwich Tern, were

bigger size, paler upperparts, white rump and a bit longer shaggy crest. The bill was longer and deeper based, appearing massive in size. It was bright orange and faded to yellow at the tip. Legs were dark grey-brown with orange-yellow at the rear tibia, knees, tarsus and soles. The tern seemed particularly bigger in flight with long wings and deep wingbeats. Newly moulted white feathers were observed at the forehead by 30 May.

The adult orange-billed tern was trapped on 2 June. It was measured (see Table 1 for values) and marked with a yellow PVC ring at the left tarsus; a blood sample was obtained before being released. The metal ring that was wearing belonged to the ICONA ringing scheme of Spain (4 101218, MIN. MEDIO AMB. ICONA MADRID), the tern had been ringed as an adult Lesser-crested Tern (*S. bengalensis*) at Marismas del Odiel, Huelva (SW Spain) on 8 October 2002 (M. Vázquez, *pers. comm.*).

Wing length	315
Tail length	155
Tail fork	68
Crest	41
Bill	65.40
Head and bill	113.05
Bill depth at rear edge of nostrils	13.57
Bill width at rear edge of nostrils	9.71
Tarsus	30.96

**Table 1.** Biometric measurements (mm) obtained on 2 June 2006 of the adult male orange-billed tern nesting at l'Albufera de València in 2006.

The chick was marked with metal ring at the right tarsus (4 123877, MIN. MEDIO AMB. ICONA MADRID) and with yellow (above) and dark blue PVC rings at the left

tarsus; a blood sample of the chick was also obtained. The downy chick was whitish, suffused buff at the upperparts. The plumage of the chick showed buff background colour at back with dark speckles at mantle and dark chevrons at the scapulars, tertials were solid mid-grey with pale fringes and the wing coverts formed faint grey bars. The head showed pale-buff forehead and buff-grey at the rear crown extended to the ear-coverts. The bill was pale but it became darker as the chick grew older, it turned from pale pinkish-yellow when recently hatched to brownish-grey with paler cutting edges when last recorded. The juvenile resulted not to be significantly different from other pale juvenile Sandwich terns found at the same colony.

The specific identity of the adult orange-billed tern remains unclear at this point.

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**Appendix.** The following images were obtained at l'Albufera de València (E Spain) during the 2006 breeding season. The date when the image was obtained is given in each case. All the images are copyright © J. Ignacio Dies and Bosco Dies.



4 May 2006





7 May 2006



The orange-billed tern of l'Albufera de València in 2006. Dies *et al.* 30 August 2006.  
"The Marsh Warehouse" Personal Page. <http://www.freewebs.com/jidies>



7 May 2006



7 May 2006



7 May 2006



17 May 2006



17 May 2006





5 June 2006



5 June 2006



17 June 2006



26 June 2006





6 July 2006



12 July 2006