

# Some significant winter records of the Gannet *Morus bassanus* (Linnaeus, 1758) from Mediterranean and Atlantic Coasts

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## Summary

Winter records of the Gannet (*Morus bassanus*) from 12 stations in Belgium, France, Morocco, Tunisia, Greece, Turkey, and Israel, with a total of ca 60 individuals, are communicated. They contribute to local avifaunas, some as cornerstone data. They are integrated into the general dynamics of the breeding and wintering area of this species.

## Kurzfassung

Von 12 Stationen in Belgien Frankreich, Marokko, Tunesien, Griechenland, Türkei und Israel werden Winternachweise von etwa 60 Exemplaren des Basstölpels (*Morus bassanus*) mitgeteilt. Sie ergänzen lokale Avifaunen, einige als Eckdaten. Sie werden in die allgemeine Entwicklung des Brut- und Zugareals der Art eingeordnet.

**Key words:** Gannet – *Morus bassanus* – Mediterranean Sea – West Africa – records – faunal dynamics

## Introduction

During a period of intense hunting, use of eggs and chickens, and of destruction of breeding colonies of the Gannet on the British Islands between 1834 and approximately 1900 the breeding population decreased from 334.000 individuals to estimated 30.000 (GURNEY 1913). From then on a slow process of recovering started due partly to diminished use of bird products

and partly to protection by law. So, the population in 1939 counted 83.000, and in 1949 ca 100.000 pairs. Also the population of Island increased from 1950 on by a yearly 6.8 % (GARDARSSON 1989).

The increasing populations expanded, establishing new breeding colonies not only close to historical sites but also out of the area known from the 19th century, e. g. on the Channel Islands (1940 Ortac), in France (1939 Rouzic, Bretagne), in Norway (1946 Rundö). This was followed later by Germany (1991 Heligoland, MÜLLER, 1992).

Following this development also the winter range expanded considerably, as is shown on the fine maps of recoveries of Gannets from Britain and Ireland in "The Migration Atlas" (WERNHAM et al. 2002: p. 131). With decreasing frequencies according to the age first-year, second-to-fourth-year and adult, Gannets were found along the West African coast, south up to Gambia and Senegal, on the Canary Islands, on Madeira and in many places offshore. In the Mediterranean Sea on the other hand the Gannet as a winter visitor is obviously under recorded. Ring recoveries are still rare compared with the Atlantic coasts, even from its western basins. Observations are scattered over the literature. An exception is the Island of Malta with its special position in the open sea, where a recent increase of winter records is well documented (MANGION, COLEIRO & MALLIA 1988).

This paper contributes to fill some local and time gaps with a selection from the authors' unpublished travel diaries.

## Observations

### Tunisia

- Nabeul Plage, 27<sup>th</sup> December 1993, 10.00 h, 2 adults, diving far offshore (site no. AF-93/01).
- Mina El-Kantaoui, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1995, 10.45 h, beach near Green Park Hotel, 1 immature, far offshore (site no. AF-95/02).
- Mina El-Kantaoui, 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1995, 9.00 h, beach near Green Park Hotel, 2 adults, fishing offshore during strong wind (site no. AF-95/02).
- Mina El-Kantaoui, 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1995, 9.20 h, beach near Green Park Hotel, 2 adults, close to the coast, heading to the North (site no. AF-95/02).
- Mina El-Kantaoui, 4<sup>th</sup> January 1995, 9.20 h, beach near Green Park Hotel, 1 immature offshore (site no. AF-95/02).
- Jerba, SE of Houmt Souk, plage de Sidi Mahrès (touristic area 2), 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2001, 18.00 h, beach near hotel Abou Nawas, 1 immature offshore (site no. AF-2001/02).
- Jerba, SE of Houmt Souk, plage de Sidi Mahrès (touristic area 2), 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2004, 15.18 h, beach near hotel Mövenpick Ulysse Palace & Thalasso, 1 immature in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year, flying offshore to NW (site no. AF-2004/01). At the same place all day long an other pelagic bird, an Arctic Skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) was molesting fishing gulls and terns.
- Jerba, Plage de Sidi Mahrès (touristic area 2), 11<sup>th</sup> January 2004, 10.30 h, beach near hotel Mövenpick Ulysse Palace & Thalasso, ca 400 m offshore a flock of 24 Gannets (including 10 adults) circled for ca 15 min slowly moving offshore to North (site no. AF-2004/01).
- Jerba, Plage de Sidi Mahrès (touristic area 2), 11<sup>th</sup> January 2004, 15.00 h, beach near hotel Mövenpick Ulysse Palace & Thalasso, 1 immature far offshore (site no. AF-2004/01).

### Turkey

- Bay of Fethiye, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1997, 3 immature Gannets passing, personal communication by Mr. Ali Ihsan Emre, Köycegiz.
- \* Alanya, harbour near Kizilkulesi, 26<sup>th</sup> November 1997, 14.50h, 1 immature Gannet, probably 3<sup>rd</sup> year, approached from W having crossed the "neck" of the Alanya peninsula, circled very close above the harbour basin, and continued following the coastline to the East (site no. VO-1997/106).

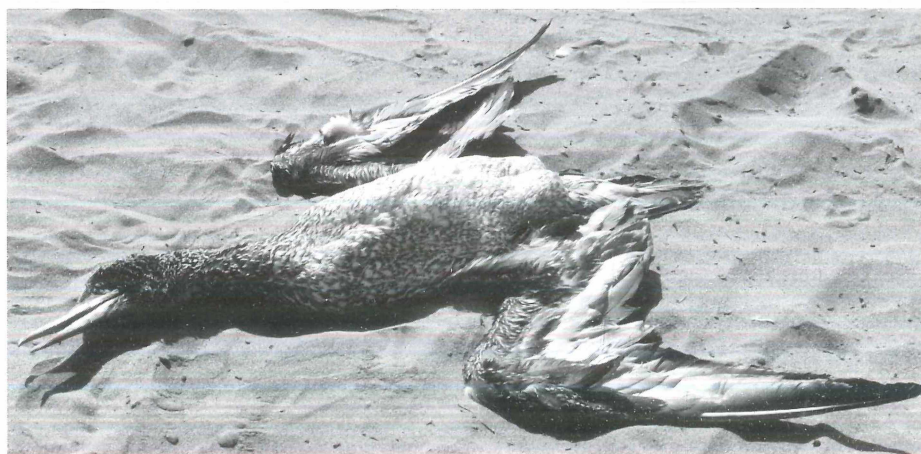


Fig. 1.: Morocco, Agadir, 1 km North of Wadi Souss, 12th October 1987

phot. R. Kinzelbach

## Atlantic Coast

- France, Guéthary, near Biarritz, 28<sup>th</sup> September 1962 1 adult and 4–5 immatures fishing offshore.
- Belgium, British Channel, some 25 km offshore SW of Oostende, 12<sup>th</sup> April 1972, at least 3 adults.
- Morocco, Agadir, beach near Wadi Lahouar, 11<sup>th</sup> October 1987, decomposed carcasse with broken skull, first-year immature (site no. AF-1987/02, foto available). On 7<sup>th</sup> October 1987 a severe storm offshore Morocco was forecasted by local weather service.
- Morocco, Agadir, Wadi Souss, 12<sup>th</sup> October 1987, fresh carcasse of first-year immature (site no. AF-1987/05, foto available).
- Morocco, Agadir, 1 km North of Wadi Souss, 12<sup>th</sup> October 1987 fresh carcasse of first-year immature (site no. AF-1987/05, foto available).
- Morocco, Taghazut, north of Agadir, 13<sup>th</sup> October 1987, 1 living immature, 1<sup>st</sup> year, on beach, not shy (site no. AF-1987/07, foto available).

## Discussion

The obvious increase of winter observations of the Gannet in the Western Mediterranean Sea, including the Tunisian coast of the Gulf of Gabès, has two reasons.

The first is an artefact, due to an intensified observation activity, in quantity and quality, concerning offshore bird life either by travelling or resident ornithologists. From the mid of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on more people became interested in field ornithology and at the same time travelling to reasonable prices became available also for birders of average income, and bird observation was frequently an important part of their recreation activities. The access to high quality optics also was easier, due to technical improvement and, again, due to affordable costs.

The second is a real increase of wintering Gannets which parallels the development of the breeding populations. The winter area expands and simultaneously the number of individuals which are recorded increases. For the North African coast ETCHÉOPAR & HÜE (1964) named Tripolis (Libya) the easternmost place of a Gannet observation and mentioned as an exception an old record from Egypt, probably the one from Port Said, 20<sup>th</sup> September 1905, which is frequently cited in literature (GOODMAN & MEININGER 1989). This picture has changed completely, the winter population in the West Mediterranean now being

estimated by 20.000–24.000 specimens (HASHMI 1998, compare also ISENMANN & MOALI 2000).

Also in the Eastern Mediterranean the number of recorded Gannets is increasing. For Turkey according to KUMERLOEVE (1962) no record was known. The actual situation is described by nearly 20 data published by KASPAREK (1990), KIRWAN & MARTINS (1994), and BOYLA & EKEN (1998).

For Greece REISER (1905: 586) wasted a lot of intellectual energy to deny the record of an immature Gannet in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year which was shot in May 1853 at Vari in the Island of Syra (Cyclades) and published by ERHARD (1858). From the recent knowledge this early date corresponded to the situation of the still numerous breeding populations in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The lack of later observations in the Aegean Sea signifies the extreme decrease of the population of the Gannet. Subsequently a growing number of winter records nowadays (14 according to HANDRINOS & AKRIOTIS 1997) reflects the regeneration of the breeding stock. Only one further, unpublished observation, also in May, should be cited: Island of Karpachos (Southern Sporades), 16<sup>th</sup> May 1991, 8–10 ad. Gannets fishing offshore of Pighadhia, R. SCHLENKER, Konstanz (in litt., 10<sup>th</sup> March 1995).

A very similar pattern is true for Egypt and the Levant coast (KUMERLOEVE 1962, GOODMAN & MEININGER 1989). In Israel a ringed bird from Scotland was found at Ashdot, 6 were seen on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1983 at Jaffa (PAZ 1987). A more recent observation of an immature Gannet I can refer to, by courtesy of Mrs. K. Springer, Darmstadt, is Israel, Nah Sholim (north of Maagan Mikha'el), 26<sup>th</sup> December 2000.

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