

**Playing behaviour in River Terns  
(*Sterna aurantia*) with inedible objects**

**Raju Kasambe,**

A-205, Trimurti Apartments, Tilak Nagar,  
Dombivli (East) – 421201, Dist. Thane,  
Maharashtra

E-mail: kasambe.raju@gmail.com

I was observing birds at Ambazari Reservoir in Nagpur city of Maharashtra on the morning of 20<sup>th</sup> May 2009. This time of the year chicks of nesting birds like Red-wattled Lapwings (*Vanellus indicus*), Yellow-wattled lapwings (*Vanellus malabaricus*), Small Pratincoles (*Glareola lactea*), Black-winged Stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*), River Terns (*Sterna aurantia*) and Little Terns (*Sterna albifrons*) are seen here. Also this is the time to see passage migrants which use the reservoir as stopover during their return migration northwards.

I saw around 40 Little Terns and many River Terns which included few fledglings at the backwaters.

At 0755 hrs I was observing one particular River Tern which seemed to be fishing. This tern hovered over shallow waters against the strong air currents. It then nosedived and came out with something but surely it was not a fish. When I observed it through the binoculars it was a piece of decaying stick. As I was watching from close distance of around 20 meters, through my powerful binoculars (Olympus, 10X50) there was no chance of mistake. It dropped the stick while hovering and again dived into the water and came out with the stick held in its bill.

The tern repeated the act of dropping and catching the stick ten times in next few

minutes. As I continued watching, it repeated the action seven times in another five minutes or so. It came out with the stick or some similar looking object on four occasions.

The tern did not consume the stick confirming that it was something inedible. The bird was just playing with the stick. As I could observe the water was quite clear and even I could see everything at the bottom.

Sabne and Khanolkar (1997) reported play feeding by Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica*. They mentioned of a Gull-billed Tern dropping and catching a fish repeatedly and finally devouring it.

Kitowski, I. (2005) reported play bouts and active training of juveniles by Montagu's Harrier (*Circus pygargus*) adults in the post-fledging period were observed. Fledglings often played with prey and with a variety of inanimate objects such as bits of moss, regurgitated pellets, sticks and a wad of hay.

Sazima (2008) reported playing behaviour in two bird species, the Neotropic Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax brasilianus*) and the Green Heron (*Butorides striata*) in southeastern Brazil. Juvenile and adult cormorants were recorded to manipulate sticks, leaves, rootlets, and plant debris while on the ground. They also played with sticks, leaves, pods, and plant debris, as well as live or dead fish while in the water, repeatedly grabbing the object and submerging it.

According to Negro et. al. (1996) young raptors devote a relatively fixed amount of time to object manipulation, and that they prefer to manipulate objects resembling natural prey. This was established through experiments with captive fledgling American Kestrels *Falco sparverius*.

Thus, there are records of playing behaviour reported among various groups of birds. And, this could be the first record of playing behaviour being reported in River Terns.

**References:**

Kitowski, I. (2005): Play behaviour and active training of Montagu's harrier (*Circus pygargus*) offspring in the post-fledging period. *Acta Ethologica*. 23:3-8.

Sabne, M. And Khanolkar, N. (1997): Play feeding by the Gull-billed Tern *Gelochelidon nilotica* (Gmelin). *J. Bom. Nat. Hist. Soc.* 94: 404.

Sazima, I. (2008): Playful birds: cormorants and herons play with objects and practice their skills. *Biota Neotropica*. Vol.8 no.2. Online Version.

Negro, J.J., Bustamante, J., Milward, J. & Bird, D.M. (1996): Captive fledgling American kestrels prefer to play with objects resembling natural prey. *Animal Behaviour*. 52: 707-714.

**Recommended citation:**

Kasambe, R. (2011): Playing behaviour in River Terns (*Sterna aurantia*) with inedible objects. *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*. 51(4): 58-59.