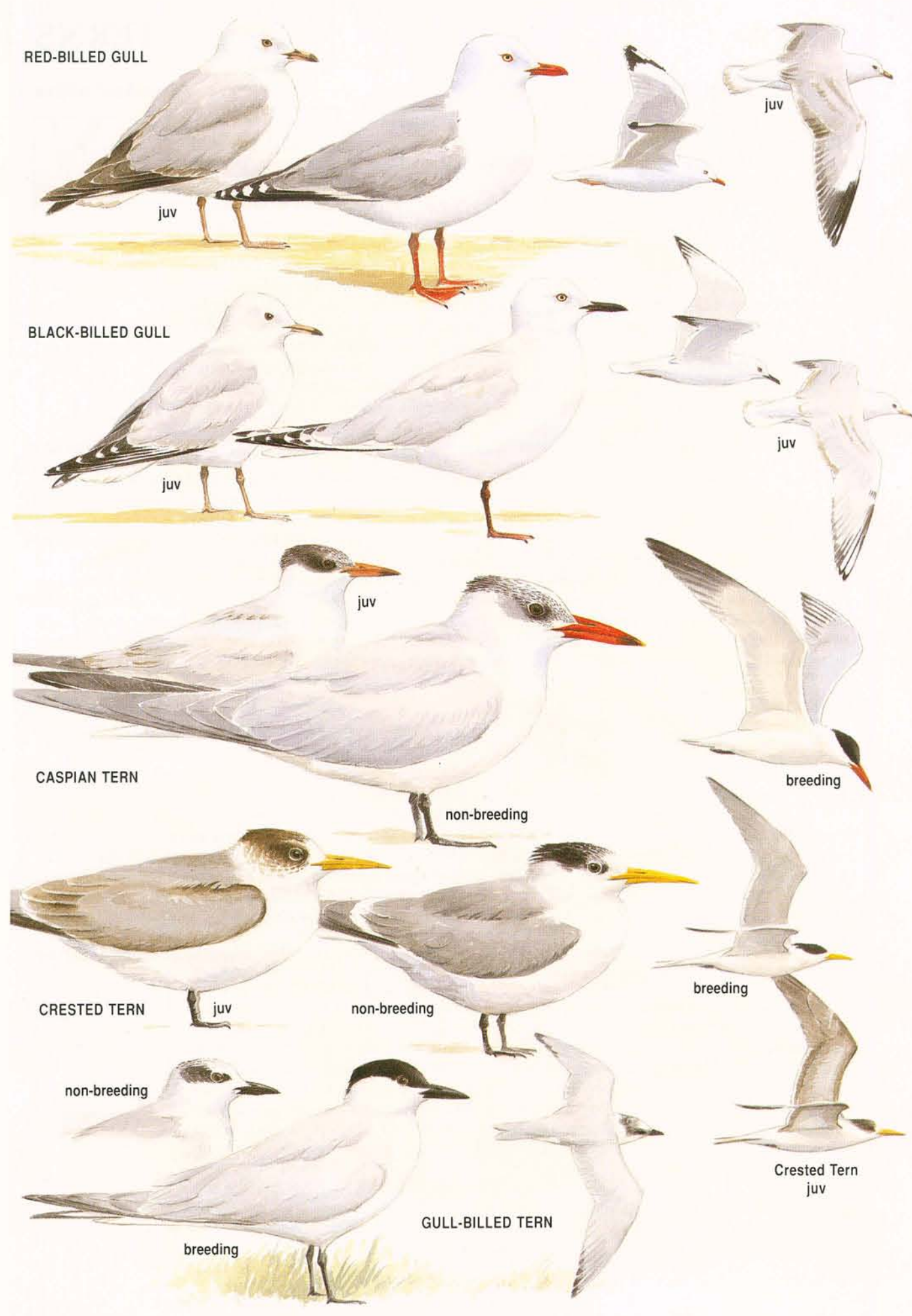


Gulls, terns and noddies are a large cosmopolitan group of mainly coastal birds. Most have short straight bills and short legs. Sexes alike. Usually grey, black or brown above, and white below in adults; juveniles usually have brown barring on back and wings. Bill and legs are often brightly coloured but usually change with age and/or season.

**RED-BILLED GULL (*Tarapunga*) *Larus novaehollandiae***

**Abundant native**

37 cm; ♂ 300 g, ♀ 260 g. Grey and white gull, mainly of the coast. Like Black-billed Gull but *shorter deeper bill* and boldly patterned wingtips. Adult has head, underparts and tail white, sometimes pinkish on breast; back and wings *pearly grey, except wingtips black with small white window*. Short deep bright red bill; legs and feet red; eye white. Juvenile and 1st year have larger dark patch at wingtip and very small, if any, white window. Bill dark with pink near base; legs pale flesh to reddish black; eye brown. **Habitat:** Breeds subantarctic from Africa to Chathams; in NZ region, on coast from Three Kings to Campbell Is; inland colony at Lake Rotorua. Common in coastal waters, beaches and estuaries; only occasionally (but sometimes in large flocks) inland to wet paddocks, playing fields and lakes. **Breeding:** Oct–Feb. [Sp 234]



**GULLS, TERNS and NODDIES** Laridae

About 88 species (47 gulls, 37 terns and 4 noddies) worldwide: 3 gulls, 6 terns and 4 noddies breed in the New Zealand region, and 8 terns visit regularly or as rare vagrants.

Gulls are coastal or inland birds in New Zealand. Adults have white bodies and grey or black backs, and broad wings with black and white patterning at the tips. Juvenile plumage has a distinctive buff barring on the back and wings. Gulls have a strong bill with a distinctive shape, deepest about a third of the way back from the tip. They walk well on quite long legs. Gregarious; breeding in colonies and feeding and roosting in large numbers. The ground nest is a shallow cup in a low, well-formed mound of vegetation. Chicks are fed by regurgitation. Gulls feed on a wide variety of foods, including human refuse, fish, shellfish, crustaceans and other invertebrates (including earthworms and grubs exposed by ploughing) and eggs of other birds.

Terns and noddies are mostly pelagic or coastal, except some are inland on rivers or over coastal lakes. Noddies breed only in the tropics or subtropics, and sailors may have named them for their absurd-seeming nodding courtship displays. Terns are usually

white below and shades of black or grey above, while noddies are more uniformly white, grey or brown. Juvenile plumage has buff barring, especially on the back and wings. Terns and noddies are more aerial than gulls and are more delicate; their wings are narrower and more pointed and their tail is often forked, sometimes deeply. They have straight, slender, tapering bills. They shuffle or waddle along on short legs. Gregarious; breeding in colonies and feeding and roosting in tight flocks. The nest is a simple scrape or depression in sand, shingle, shell or rock, but some noddies build a small platform nest in a tree or shrub, and White Terns simply lay their egg in a depression on a tree branch. Whole small fish, caught mainly by plunging or by picking from the surface of water and held crosswise in the bill, are usually brought in courtship display and to the chicks, but some tropical terns and noddies feed by regurgitation. Chicks go on begging for months after they can fly.

**Reading:** Grant, P.J. 1981. *Gulls: An Identification Guide*. Calton: Poyser. Harrison, P. 1983. *Seabirds: An Identification Guide*. Beckenham: Croom Helm. Serventy, D.L. et al. 1971. *The Handbook of Australian Sea-birds*. Sydney: A.H. & A.W. Reed.

**234. RED-BILLED GULL *Larus novaehollandiae*** Plate 54

**Other names:** Tarapunga, Silver Gull (Australia)

**Size:** 37 cm; males 300 g, females 260 g

**Geographical variation:** Four subspecies: *hartlaubii* breeds in South Africa, *novae-hollandiae* in Australia, *forsteri* in the south-western Pacific from Torres Strait to New Caledonia, and *scopulinus* in New Zealand.

**Distribution:** Breed on coasts and offshore islands of South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, and on islands in Melanesia. In New Zealand, they breed in about 80 colonies on the mainland coasts and offshore islands, and on the Three Kings, Chatham, The Snares, Auckland and Campbell Islands. They are stragglers to the Kermadecs and are strangely absent from the Bounty Islands and the Antipodes. There is an inland colony in the North Island at Lake Rotorua, where they nest with, and rarely hybridise with, Black-billed Gulls. Red-billed Gulls frequent estuaries, harbours and open coastlines, and parks of coastal cities. They sometimes venture inland onto wet paddocks, sportsfields and freshly ploughed farmland, and a few use lakes in the central North Island.

They are moderately mobile; most birds abandon the breeding colony in autumn, and many individuals undertake regular seasonal movements of several hundred kilometres between breeding sites and their traditional wintering sites, e.g. between Kaikoura and Wellington Harbour. Most birds remain

within 400 km of their breeding colony, but birds banded at Kaikoura have been seen in Auckland and in Invercargill. Individuals commute 20 km or more each day between roosting or breeding sites and offshore feeding sites. At sea, they are mainly in coastal waters; however, they occasionally follow ships out into pelagic waters.

**Population:** Widespread and locally common. The three largest colonies, each with 5000+ breeding pairs, are at the Three Kings Islands, Mokohinau Island and at Kaikoura. The New Zealand population has increased substantially since European settlement, but may now be stable or declining, as the important winter food supplies of offal and sewage discharged into the sea have been greatly reduced since 1970.

**Conservation:** Protected native. Red-billed Gulls have benefited from human settlement in New Zealand, especially with the creation of readily available winter food supplies from meatworks, fish processors, fishing boats, sewer outfalls and scraps discarded in city parks.

**Breeding:** Red-billed Gulls nest in large, densely packed colonies of up to 6000 pairs on sandspits, boulderbanks, shellbanks, gravel beaches, rocky headlands and rocky islets, usually near marine upwellings. Numbers of birds at colonies start building up in mid-July, but nesting sites are not occupied until early August. Pairs usually

remain together year after year, but their nesting site changes within the colony. Both birds help to build the nest, but the male does most of the work. The nest is a small mound of dry grass, seaweed, twigs, feathers and tidal flotsam, measuring about 15 cm in diameter, with a shallow depression in the centre.

On the mainland, most eggs are laid from early October to late December, but on the subantarctic islands the season is about a month later. Older birds lay earlier in the season than younger ones. The clutch is of 1–2–5 brownish-ochre eggs (52.5 x 37.5 mm) with purple or brown spots and blotches. Clutches of 4 or 5 are laid by two females. Egg size declines through a clutch and through the season. Both sexes incubate for 24–25–27 days and then brood and feed the nestlings. The chicks remain close to the nest and are usually guarded by one of the parents. The fledging period is c. 37 days, and the fledglings remain dependent on their parents for a further 3 weeks. A few males start breeding at 1 year old, but most do not start nesting until 3–4, about a year younger than females. Females have a higher annual survival rate (89%) than males (84%), with corresponding life expectancies of 9 and 6 years, respectively. The oldest bird recorded lived at least 28 years.

**Behaviour:** Highly gregarious; nesting in large colonies, roosting in large flocks and often feeding in flocks of thousands of birds at locally abundant food. When breeding, they vigorously defend a small area around their nest and attack other birds or people entering the area. Young non-breeding birds normally

form 'clubs' near the colony during the breeding season. Red-billed Gulls have a variety of breeding calls, but the most characteristic call heard through the year is a strident and discordant scream.

**Feeding:** During the breeding season, Red-billed Gulls feed mainly in inshore waters on the planktonic euphausiid *Nyctiphanes australis*, although some other marine invertebrates, small fish, terrestrial insects and earthworms are also taken. A few birds specialise in stealing eggs from other Red-billed Gulls or White-fronted Terns. In autumn and winter, the diet is much more varied and they feed on offal, refuse, carrion, marine invertebrates, shellfish and fish. They are usually seen feeding on offal from fishing boats, fish-processing plants or meatworks, at sewer outfalls, along the shoreline, at rubbish tips or on scraps in city parks. During bad weather, they often head inland to feed on worms and insects forced to the surface in wet pastures or sportsfields.

**In the hand:** Males are larger than females, but measurements overlap. Bill measurements provide a good discrimination between sexes; males have a positive score from the equation 0.26 x bill length + bill depth at gonys (deepest part) - 22.875, and females have a negative score.

**Reading:** Gurr, L. 1967. *Ibis* 109: 552–555. Gurr, L. & Jinks, F.C. 1965. *Notornis* 12: 223–240. Mills, J.A. 1969. *Notornis* 16: 180–186. Mills, J.A. 1971. *NZ J Mar Fresh Res* 5: 326–328. Mills, J.A. 1973. *J Anim Ecol* 42: 147–162. Mills, J.A. 1979. *Ibis* 121: 53–67. Mills, J.A. 1989. In Newton, I. (ed.). *Lifetime Reproduction in Birds*. London: Academic Press. Powlesland, R.G. & Powlesland, M.H. 1994. *Notornis* 41: 117–132.