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Birds of New Zealand - Locality Guide. 3rd edn.

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Fairy tern: pp 197-199.



FAIRY TERN

Family Sternidae

Species *Sterna nereis*

Common name Fairy Tern (Not to be confused with the White Tern (*Gygis alba*), a tropical species, which sometimes goes by the name of Fairy Tern.)

Status Native

Abundance Rare

Size 250 mm (cf sparrow 145 mm, Little Tern 250 mm)

Habitat A coastal species which in New Zealand appears to prefer long sandy beaches in spring and summer but winters in harbours and estuaries.

New Zealand range On the Kaipara Harbour near South Head and on the east coast Northland beaches from Pakiri in the south to Whangarei Heads in the north.

Discussion The New Zealand Fairy Tern, (*S. n. davisae*) is considered a subspecies of the Australian Fairy Tern and is separated mainly by an enlarged area of black feathering in front of the eye. It is one of New Zealand's most endangered species

totalling about 30 birds. It nests in very small numbers along two stretches of the Northland east coast and on one small stretch of the Northland west coast. This bird is easily confused with the migrant Little Tern which ranges from Africa through Asia to Australia and in places over-laps with the Fairy Tern.

Description – breeding plumage

Forehead White with a rounded recess to above the eye. **Crown and nape** Black, which encircles the eye. **Back and wings** Light grey but primary feathers darker. **Neck and underparts** White. **Tail** White and forked. **Bill** Yellow-orange. **Legs** Orange.

Description – non-breeding

Crown White of forehead extends to mid-crown.

Conspicuous features

- Yellow bill right to the tip.
- Black eye surround.
- White rounded recess above the eye.
- Forked tail.

Call Both Fairy and Little Terns make high-pitched “cheet” or “peep” calls.

Nest and chicks The Fairy Tern is a solitary nester which lays two eggs in the sand relying on camouflage to protect the chicks from aerial and other predators. Chicks on hatching cryptically blend with the colour of the sand. By day 21 birds they have taken on grey plumage feathers barred with dark grey and have assumed a rusty coloured head which helps them blend in with dead shells and especially those of golden oysters.

Differences between breeding Fairy Tern and Little Tern

- Fairy Tern has a yellow bill.
- Little Tern has a yellow bill which is black-tipped.
- Fairy Tern has a black cap which extends around the eye in a soft S curve. This black does not extend right to the bill.
- Little Tern has a neat black cap which extends around the eye in a sharp V which then extends to the bill.
- Fairy Tern is paler grey on wings and back and lacks the dark grey primary wing feathers of the Little Tern.
- Fairy Tern has a rounded forehead.
- Little Tern has a swept back forehead.

Differences between non-breeding Fairy Terns and Little Terns

- Fairy Tern has more black on the crown.
- Little Tern has a swept back crown with black towards the nape.

Differences between immature Fairy Terns and Little Terns

- Immature birds are inseparable.
- Birds of both species have black bills and indistinct white crowns mottled

with black feather scalation.

- Fairy Terns always have a higher crown.

Field characteristics which can help separate the two species

- Fairy Terns are more communal and will feed in company.
- Little Terns are more solitary when feeding.
- Fairy Terns dive boldly, more akin to the Caspian Tern.
- Little Terns dive with gentle splashes.
- Fairy Terns in flight usually fly level and direct, not unlike the Caspian Tern and their dives are stronger.
- Little Terns tend to hover with fast wing beats, with heads down, not unlike Marsh Terns.
- Little Terns intermingle on high tide roosts with other birds such as Lesser Knots. Fairy Terns tend to roost alone.

Where to find – North Island

Northland – Mangawhai Birds nest on the sand near the entrance to the heads. Areas are fenced from intruders. Enter the sand dunes via Pacific Road to the south of the Mangawhai shopping centre and walk northwards. P. 286.

Northland – Waipu at Uretiti Reserve off Highway 1. P. 285.

Northland – From Waipu town drive to the river-mouth and turn into Johnsons Point Road. Cross the river in a southerly direction (at low tide only). Nesting birds are fenced off. P. 285.

Northland – Pakari Follow the road to Pakari from Leigh. P. 286.

North Auckland – West of Wellsford at Manukapua Island. P. 287.

North Auckland – At Papakanui Spit on South Head. P. 295.