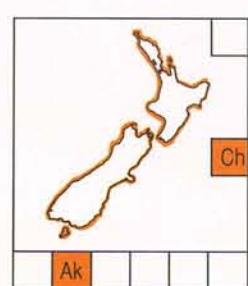


Gulls, terns and noddies are a large cosmopolitan group of mainly coastal birds. Most have short straight bills and short legs. Sexes alike. Usually grey, black or brown above, and white below in adults; juveniles usually have brown barring on back and wings. Bill and legs are often brightly coloured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

WHITE-FRONTED TERN (Tara) *Sterna striata*

Abundant native

40 cm, 160 g. Commonest tern on NZ coast, often in large flocks. *Long black bill; short legs, black or reddish black. Breeding adult is very pale pearly grey and white; black cap separated from bill by white forehead; neck and underparts white, sometimes pinkish on breast. In flight, upperwing entirely pale grey except for black outer web to outer primary; underwing white to tips. At rest, deeply forked tail extends well beyond wings. Non-breeding adult similar, but cap recedes to above eyes; at rest, tail level with wings. Juvenile heavily marked brown and white on upperparts; dark mottling on upperwing (carpal bar), prominent at rest, and in flight forms a dark triangle on inner forewing; primaries mid-grey; tail even with or shorter than wings. Immature similar, but mottling on inner forewing shows as black line at shoulder. Feeds by plunge-diving. Call a high-pitched 'siet'. Habitat: Breeds coast of NZ mainland, Chatham and Auckland Is; visitor to other subantarctic islands. Favours coastal waters and harbours. Large flocks form over shoaling fish, especially in summer and autumn. Roosts on shellbanks or sandspits. Rarely seen inland. Many, including most juveniles, winter in Australian waters. Breeding: Oct–Feb.* [Sp 241]



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 plunge-diving 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.



241. WHITE-FRONTED TERN *Sterna striata* Plate 55

Other name: Tara
Size: 42 cm, 160 g
Distribution: New Zealand only, apart from a few that have bred on islands of Bass Strait, Australia, since 1979. White-fronted Terns breed abundantly from Northland to Southland, especially on the eastern coast and on offshore islands. They are also abundant at the Chatham and Auckland Islands, and breed around the coast of Stewart Island. An occasional visitor to The Snares and Campbell Island. Colonies are ephemeral, a site used successfully one year may be abandoned and a new site used. In autumn, large numbers of young birds and some adults migrate to the southeastern coast of Australia, mostly May–November in New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania, some ranging west to South Australia and north to Queensland. However, many adults stay on New Zealand coasts throughout the winter. They are rarely recorded inland but have visited Lakes Taupo and Rotorua.
Population: 15–20,000 pairs in 1997. By far the commonest tern on the New Zealand shore and in coastal waters. Some colonies contain thousands of pairs, but usually 50–200 pairs. Some birds nest alone or in groups of only a few pairs.
Conservation: Protected native. For unknown reasons, the number of birds seems to be declining rapidly, but the capriciousness of colonies makes them difficult to monitor.

Large numbers persist despite severe predation of breeding adults by cats, and of eggs and chicks by mustelids, rats and cats. **Breeding:** Large colonies are generally on sandy beaches, low-lying sandspits, shingle or shellbanks and rocky islets, and smaller colonies are usually on rock stacks, steep cliffs and offshore islands. White-fronted Terns often nest close to Red-billed Gull colonies. Laying is from mid-October to January, during which several replacement clutches are laid if eggs or chicks are lost to predators or storm surges. They lay 1–2 eggs (46 x 33 mm) on the mainland of New Zealand, but 1–2–3 eggs (46 x 32 mm) on the Chathams. Eggs vary from pale green-blue to light brown with an array of spots. The first egg is larger than the second, and birds over 6 years old lay on average larger eggs than younger birds. Both adults incubate for c. 24 days and then brood the chicks for several days; the chicks then join others in a crèche. Each pair usually rears only one chick to fledging at 29–35 days old. The adults continue to feed their young up to 3 months after leaving the colony. Young birds can start breeding at 3 years old, but most start when at least 7 years old. The oldest banded bird lived over 26 years. **Behaviour:** Gregarious. Most breed in large, tightly packed colonies with less than a metre between nests. White-fronted Terns feed in coastal waters in large flocks, forming great 'swirls' over shoaling fish, in company with

Fluttering and Flesh-footed Shearwaters, Australasian Gannets and Red-billed and Black-backed Gulls. They roost in tight flocks of up to 2000 birds on beaches, on shellbanks and at the mouths of estuaries. The usual call is a single high-pitched note: 'siet', repeated at intervals and given particularly in flight by day or night. **Feeding:** Diet is mainly small surface-shoaling

fish such as smelt and pilchards, caught by shallow plunge-diving. They often work shoals that kahawai and kingfish have driven to the surface. They are often pursued by skuas, which force them to disgorge and drop the fish they have caught. **Reading:** Mills, J.A. & Shaw, P.W. *NZ J Zool* 7: 147–153.