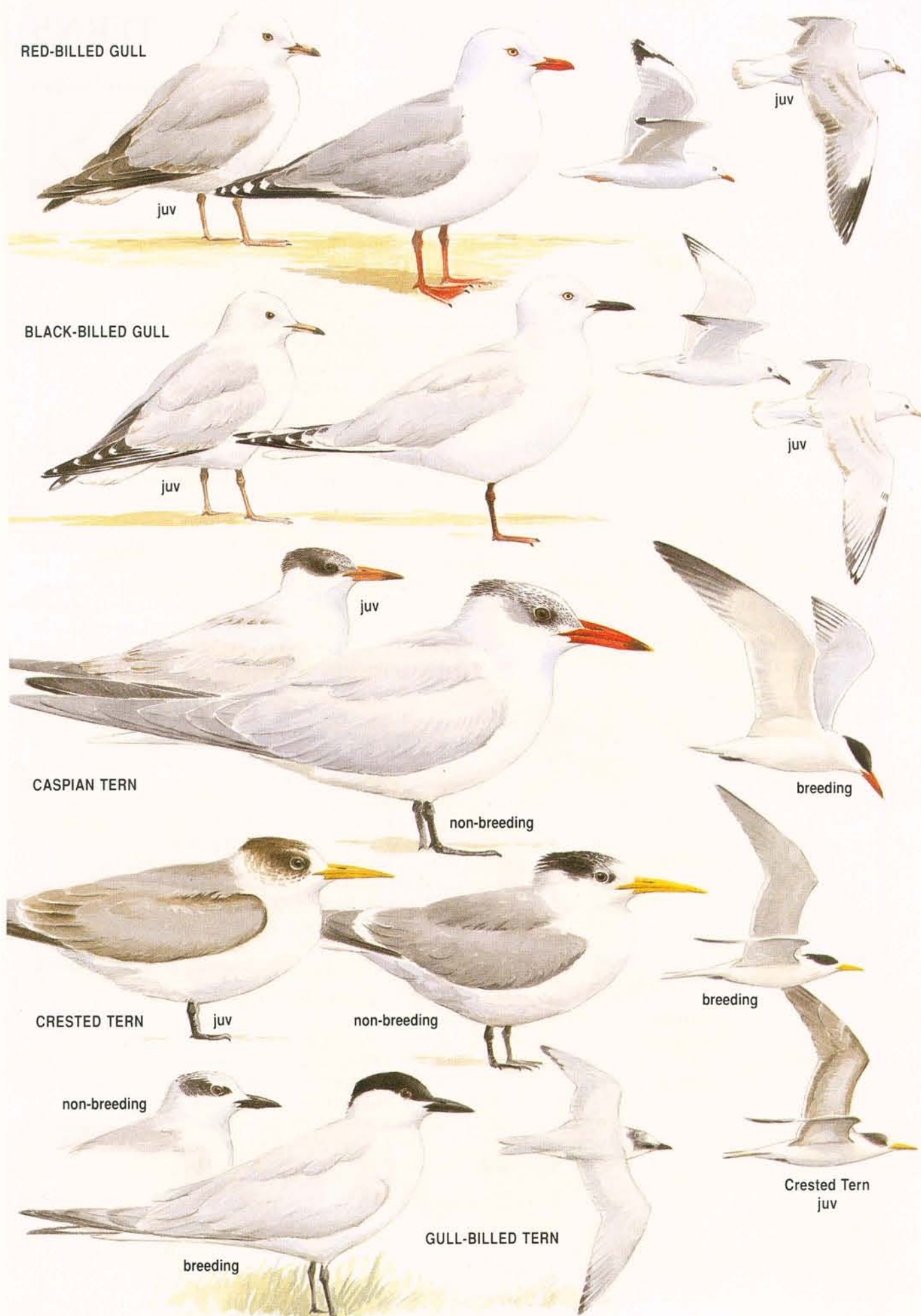


Gulls, terns and noddies are a large cosmopolitan group of mainly coastal birds. Most have short straight bills and short legs. Sexes alike. Usually grey, black or brown above, and white below in adults; juveniles usually have brown barring on back and wings. Bill and legs are often brightly coloured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

GULL-BILLED TERN *Gelochelidon nilotica*

Rare subtropical vagrant

43 cm, 230 g. Robust pale tern with long broad wings, short slightly forked tail, short thick gull-like black bill and long black legs. Breeding adult has black cap; back and wings very pale grey; neck and underparts white. Non-breeding adult has a black patch from eye to ear coverts, and grey flecking on nape. Hawks and skims over water or land, picking up prey in flight; rarely dives into water. **Habitat:** Breeds tropics and subtropics, including Australia. A few reach NZ estuaries and coastal marshes. [Sp 238]



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.

238. GULL-BILLED TERN *Gelochelidon nilotica*

Plate 54

Size: 43 cm, 230 g

Geographical variation: Of the six subspecies, *macrotarsa* of Australia and New Guinea is one most likely to reach New Zealand. The

Asian subspecies *affinis*, recorded near Darwin, is possible.

Distribution: Almost cosmopolitan, breeding in the Americas, Africa, across temperate

Europe and Asia to China, Indonesia, New Guinea and inland Australia, mainly in the southeast. They are common on most Australian coasts but rare in Tasmania. In New Zealand, a few vagrants have been seen in most years since they were first recorded at Invercargill in 1955. They are occasionally seen in small flocks, e.g. eight at Manukau Harbour (1976) and six at Taporā (2001), and some

birds remain in a district for several years. **Behaviour:** Most New Zealand records have been at estuaries or coastal lagoons and marshes, but they are as likely to feed over grassland and ploughed fields. They fly low and swoop from time to time to snatch invertebrates or small fish from the surface.

Reading: McKenzie, H.R. 1955. *Notornis* 6: 163-164.