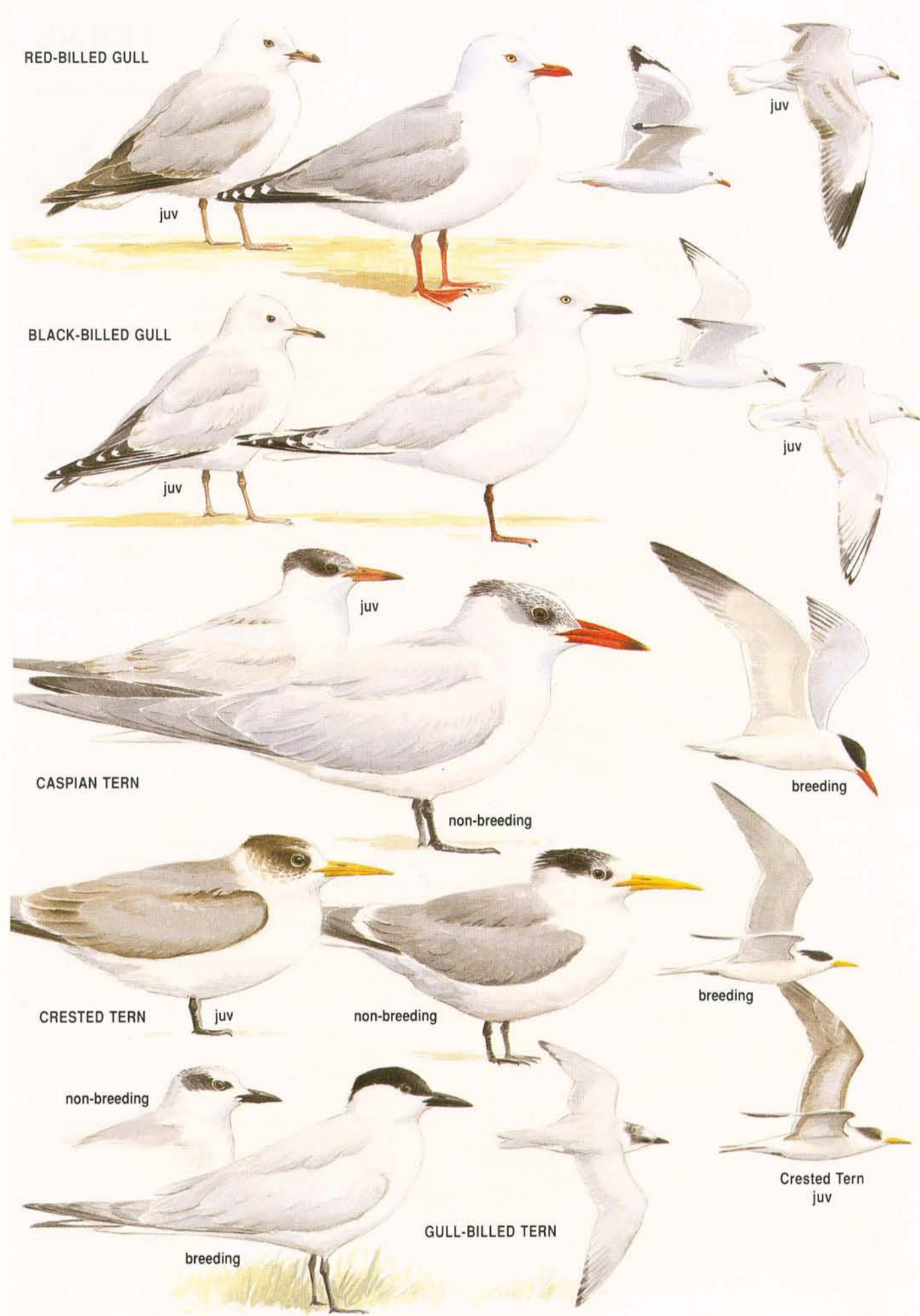


Gulls, terns and noddies are a large cosmopolitan group of mainly coastal birds. Most have short straight bills and short legs. Sexes alike. Usually grey, black or brown above, and white below in adults; juveniles usually have brown barring on back and wings. Bill and legs are often brightly coloured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

CASPIAN TERN (Taranui) *Sterna caspia*

Uncommon native

51 cm, 700 g. *Very large silver-grey tern with massive red bill tipped black and yellow; short white, slightly forked tail; underparts white with dark tips to underwing. Adult has black cap when breeding, heavily flecked white in non-breeding plumage; legs black. Juvenile has browner cap; back feathers sparsely edged buff and white; bill orange-red; legs dull orange. Flight direct, with steady shallow beats of broad wings; head and bill pointing downward when hunting. Dives into water. Adult call a loud harsh 'kaaa'; juveniles beg with a persistent high-pitched mewling. Habitat:* Breeds widely; in NZ, colonies on isolated sandspits and shellbanks of coast and harbours; some pairs on riverbeds or lake shores. Feeds in inshore waters, up rivers and over coastal lakes. Vagrant to Kermadecs and Chathams. **Breeding:** Sep–Jan. [Sp 240]



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.

240. CASPIAN TERN *Sterna caspia*

Plate 54

Other name: Taranui
Size: 51 cm, 700 g

Distribution: Almost cosmopolitan, breeding locally in temperate parts of all continents but South America. They breed in Central and North America north to the Great Lakes, in Africa, from Europe across central Asia to China, and Australasia. In New Zealand, they breed on both main islands, usually coastal but small numbers sometimes inland, especially near Rotorua and on Canterbury rivers. A rare vagrant to the Kermadec and Chatham Islands. The main colonies are on estuarine shellbanks or sandspits: Rangaunu, Whangarei, Kaipara, Whangapoua and Kawhia Harbours; Mangawhai Estuary; Bowntonga, Tauranga Harbour; Matakana Island; Ohope Spit; Lake Onoke Spit, Palliser Bay; Farewell Spit, Waimea Estuary, Vernon Lagoon, Lake Ellesmere and Invercargill Estuary. Single pairs and small colonies breed on sandy beaches and at many harbours and estuaries, sometimes in association with colonies of Black-backed Gulls, less often with Red-billed or Black-billed Gulls.

After breeding, North Island birds tend to stay within 100 km of their breeding places; birds banded in Northland feed and roost on such harbours as the Kaipara, Manukau and the Firth of Thames, but some birds move much further south. South Island birds tend to move north in autumn, and adults return to breed again in spring. Birds banded near Invercargill travel in stages to wintering places at the Avon–Heathcote Estuary and Lake Ellesmere, some reaching southern North Island estuaries, and one even reached the Manukau Harbour. Most Caspian Terns stay on or near the coast, but single birds may be seen working rivers well inland, e.g. to Palmerston North, Masterton and Upper Hutt, and a few visit inland lakes such as Taupo.

Population: c. 3000 birds; colony sizes and locations are quite variable from year to year but rarely exceed 100 pairs.

Conservation: Protected rare native. Caspian Terns may be a quite recent colonist of New Zealand, as they were not recorded by early

naturalists until about 1860. They were scarce until about the 1930s but became increasingly common to the 1970s. Since then, the population may have slipped back, as several major colonies have been disturbed by increased human activity and planting pine trees and marram on the favoured bare sandspits. Some colonies are now fenced off to prevent damage from off-road vehicles and from people and dogs.

Breeding: Most Caspian Terns nest in large, loose colonies. The nest is a shallow, unlined scrape in the sand or other substrate. Laying is from late September to early December. They lay 1–2–3 light stone eggs (64 x 45 mm, 75 g), evenly sprinkled with dark brown spots and blotches. Both adults incubate for 26–29 days, and brood the chicks for the first 5–10 days. The chicks hatch over several days, and, when food is in short supply, the youngest starve. The chicks fledge at 33–38 days old and continue to be fed for several months. They accompany their parents to wintering sites, usually staying there until they return to the colony to breed at 3–5 years old. The oldest banded bird in New Zealand lived over 24 years.

Behaviour: Gregarious; many breed in loose colonies of up to 100 pairs, up to 350 pairs at the South Kaipara Head colony in the 1970s. They roost in small flocks between feeding bouts at estuaries and on sandy beaches, but they usually feed alone.

Caspian Terns are often heard first, the usual call in flight being a loud, harsh 'kaaa', or a repetitive variant of it; there are other, less frequent calls. Juveniles are very audible, uttering a persistent high-pitched mewling call.

Feeding: Diet is mainly small surface-swimming fish such as yellow-eyed mullet, smelt and piper; also stargazers and small flounders, which are caught by plunging into the water at a steep angle, often fully submerging. Inland, they catch smelt, whitebait, bullies, trout and small eels. Juveniles dip-feed while standing in shallow water at the tide's edge, taking worms and small flounders.

Reading: Pierce, R.J. 1984. *Notornis* 31: 185–190. Sibson, R.B. 1992. *Notornis* 39: 87–93.