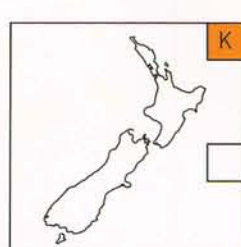


Tropicbirds are medium-sized, white, rather tern-like seabirds mostly confined to the tropics. Distinguished from terns by their wedge-shaped tail. Sexes alike. Adults have 2 long central tail-streamers. Juveniles have black barring above and lack tail streamers. Their flight is distinctive; direct with strong steady wingbeats about 30 m above the sea. Over land, they ride the updraughts along cliffs and hills. At sea, they plunge-dive for fish and squid.

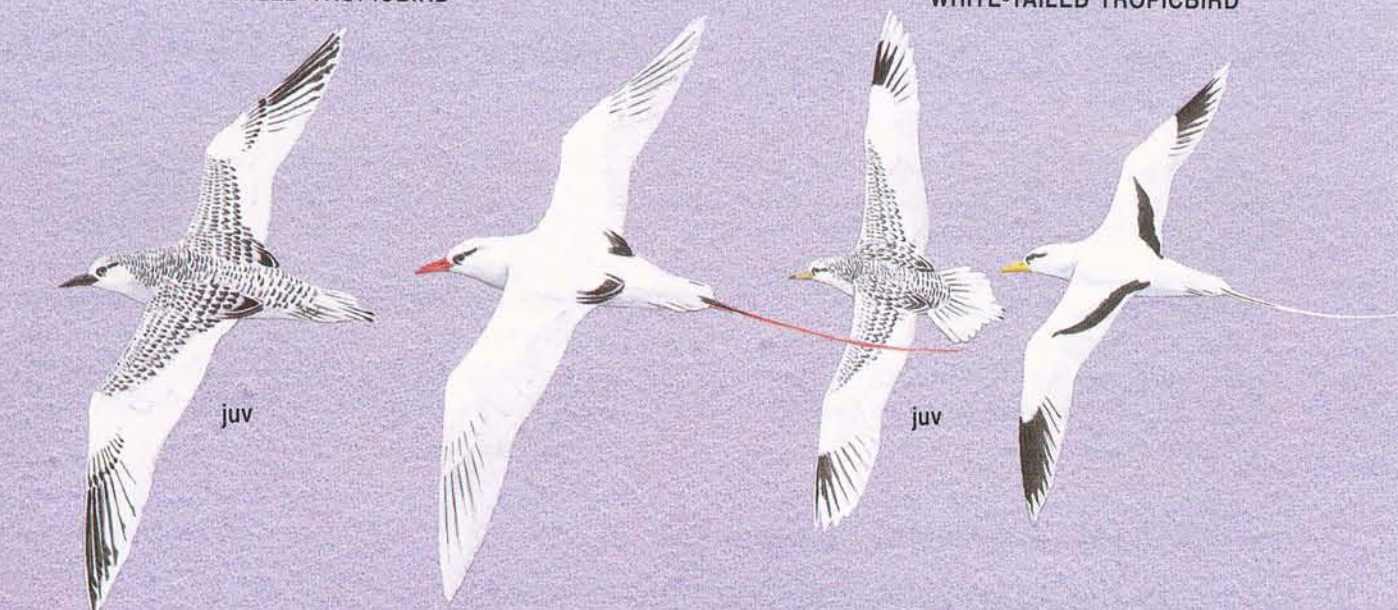
RED-TAILED TROPICBIRD (Amokura) *Phaethon rubricauda* Rare tropical native

46 cm, (+ up to 40 cm for tail streamers), 800 g. Adult white with black feather-shafts on primaries, tertiaries and tail; black mark through eye. Tern-like bright red bill; tail streamers red but often difficult to see. Juvenile lacks tail streamers, is barred black above and has black or dull red bill. **Habitat:** Tropical seas; in NZ region, breeds at Kermadecs. Rare vagrant to northern NZ mainland. **Breeding:** Dec–Aug. [Sp 85]

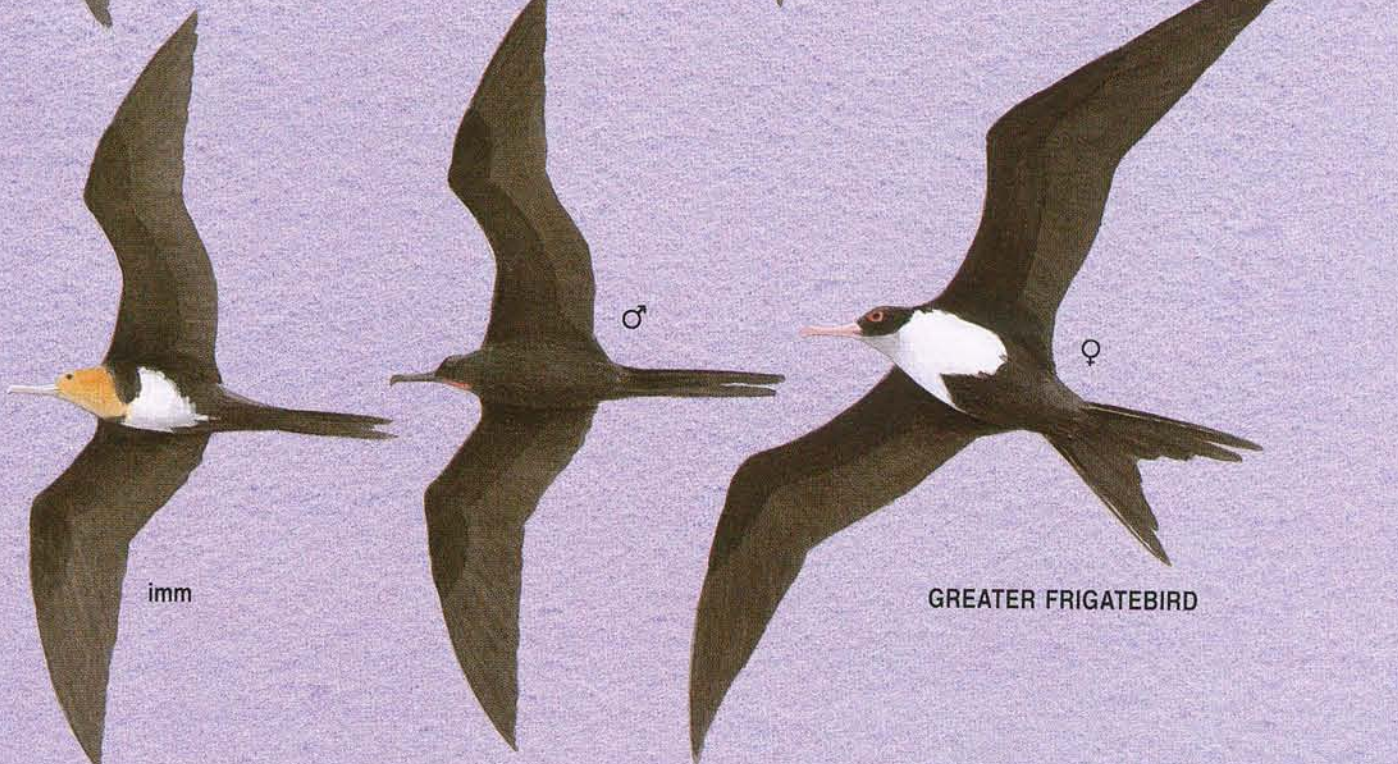


RED-TAILED TROPICBIRD

WHITE-TAILED TROPICBIRD



LESSER FRIGATEBIRD



GREATER FRIGATEBIRD

TROPICBIRDS

3 species; 2 in the New Zealand region, including 1 species breeding at the Kermadec Islands.

Sailors called tropicbirds 'bos'n birds' because the projecting middle tail feathers resembled the marlin spike of the boatswain and their call is like his whistle. These white seabirds are confined to tropical and subtropical seas,

Phaethontidae

often far from land. They are usually solitary or in pairs, flying strongly well above the surface, approaching ships with a steady flight and briefly escorting them. Tropicbirds feed on fish and squid, taken mostly by plunge-diving. They breed on the ground, solitarily or in loose colonies, the density depending on available nest sites rather than social need.

85. RED-TAILED TROPICBIRD

Phaethon rubricauda Plate 21

Other name: Amokura
Size: 46 cm, plus up to 40 cm for tail streamers; 800 g
Geographical variation: A single species but with a gradual increase in size and of the pink suffusion on the white plumage from the northern Pacific to the Kermadecs.
Distribution: Breeds on many islands of the tropical Indian and Pacific Oceans, including Lord Howe, Norfolk and the Kermadec Islands. They remain at sea when not breeding, although a few are seen near the Kermadecs in winter. In summer, and usually after tropical cyclones, a few birds are seen around northern New Zealand, mainly off Northland or in the Hauraki Gulf, or beach-wrecked on the coasts of Northland and occasionally as far south as the Waikato, Taranaki and Wanganui coasts. They have twice been recorded inland at Lake Taupo. The only South Island record is of a bird at Akaroa in the 1950s.
Population: c. 120 birds breed at the Kermadec Islands.
Conservation: Protected native. No information available on population trends.
Breeding: Laying is in December–April, mostly December–January. They lay 1 fawn egg, spotted and blotched reddish brown (67

x 47 mm, 80 g) in a scrape on the ground, often in inaccessible positions in cavities and fissures of rugged cliffs. Both sexes incubate in shifts of 2–7 days for 42–46 days. The young stay at the nest for c. 3 months, leaving in April–May, but there are records of large chicks at Macauley Island in August.
Behaviour: When not breeding, Red-tailed Tropicbirds are usually seen as singles, pairs at the most. They are silent at sea but noisy, especially in aerial display in pairs, at breeding islands. In display, they have a special hover that makes them seem to fly in reverse. Their short legs cannot support them, and they shuffle along, their breast touching the ground.
Feeding: Fish and squid are caught by plunge-diving from both high and low altitudes.
In the hand: Much larger than White-tailed Tropicbird (wing 330–360 mm cf. 260–280 mm), and adult plumage is very different. Juvenile upperparts barring is similar, but the bill tends to be all blackish or blackish with red base, whereas the bill of juvenile White-tailed Tropicbirds tends to be yellowish with a blackish tip.
Reading: Merton, D.V. 1970. *Notornis* 17: 147–199. Powlesland, R.G. *et al.* 1992. *Notornis* 39: 101–111. Tarburton, M.K. 1984. *Notornis* 31: 92–94. Tarburton, M.K. 1989. *Notornis* 36: 39–49.