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

Arun Books, Orewa, New Zealand.

Eastern little tern: pp 199-200.



EASTERN LITTLE TERN

Family Sternidae

Species *Sterna albifrons*

Common names Little Tern or Eastern Little Tern

Status Migrant

Abundance Rare

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

Habitat Harbours and estuaries.

Worldwide range A wide ranging species known from Europe, North and South America, Africa and Asia. A few straggle to New Zealand probably from Australia, where they breed from Tasmania to northern Queensland.

New Zealand range The Manukau Harbour and the Firth of Thames host most of the summer population. Up to 25 birds turn up at summer counts and up to five at winter counts. Frequently recorded also from the Bay of Plenty and Farewell Spit in small numbers.

Description – breeding plumage

Forehead White extending to a white line above the eye. **Crown** A black line extends from base of bill through the eye to the black head cap. **Back** Grey. **Wings** Grey with dark edges to primaries. **Underparts** White. **Tail** White and forked. **Bill** Yellow-orange with a black tip. **Legs** Yellow.

Description – non-breeding

Crown Receded black cap at back of head. **Bill** Pale yellow with dark tip.

Note See Fairy Tern article for differences between Little Tern and Fairy Tern. Birds in breeding plumage are more easily separated from Fairy Terns.

Conspicuous features

- Yellow-orange bill with black tip.
- Partial black cap and the black line through eye to bill.
- White line above eye.

Conspicuous characteristics

- Sits with roosting shorebirds at high tide usually near the tide line.
- Hovers in an agitated manner before diving.
- Very dainty when in flight.

Call Urgent “peet peet” sounds.

Where to find – North Island

North Auckland – Kaipara Harbour at Manukapua Island. P. 287.

South Auckland – Manukau Harbour at Te Hihi but this has no public access. P. 300.

South Auckland – Miranda on shellbanks. P. 302.

From PP. 198.199

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.