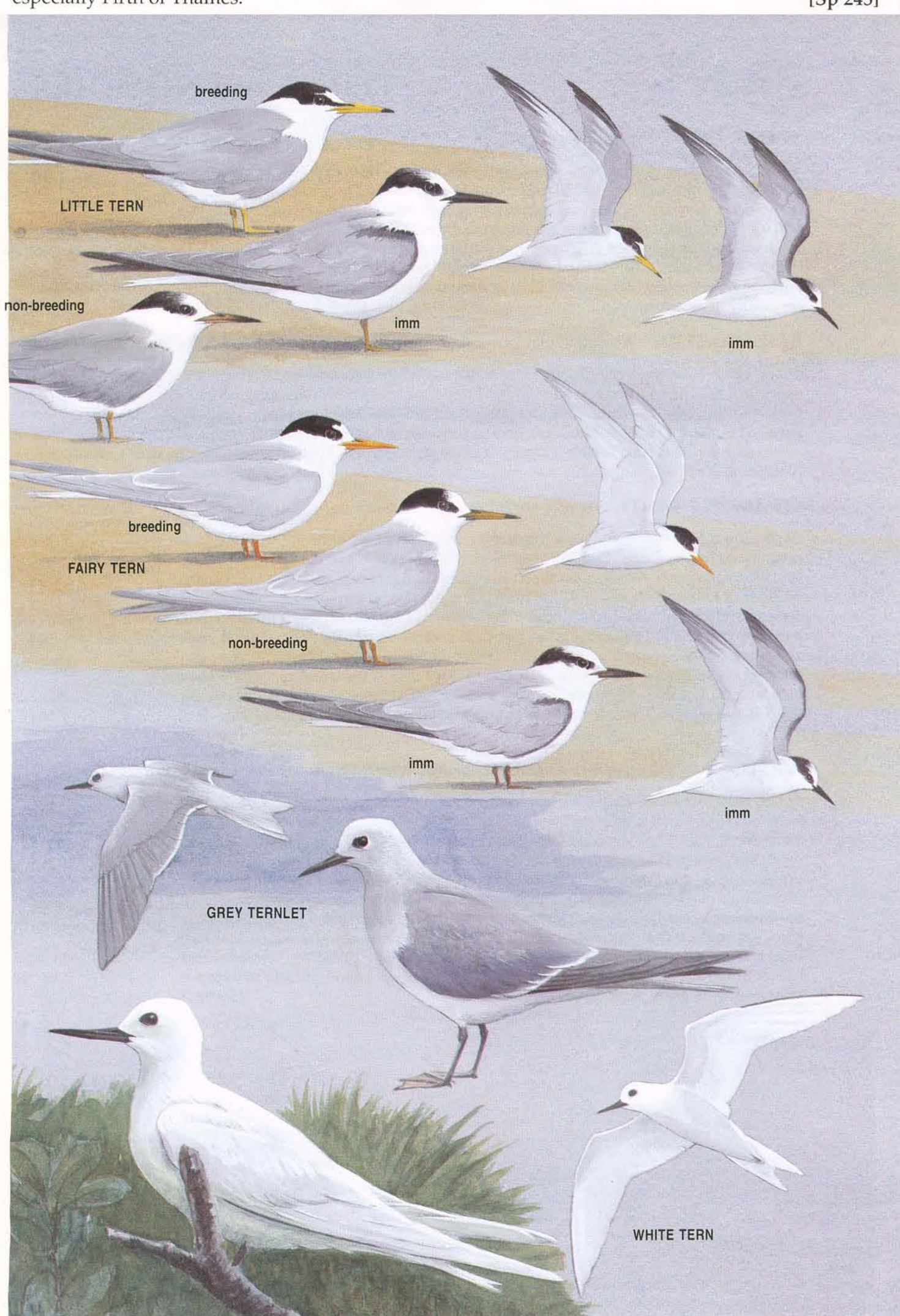


Gulls, terns and noddies are a large cosmopolitan group of mainly coastal birds. Most have short straight bills and short legs. Sexes alike. Usually grey, black or brown above, and white below in adults; juveniles usually have brown barring on back and wings. Bill and legs are often brightly coloured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

LITTLE TERN *Sterna albifrons*

Uncommon Asian migrant

25 cm, 50 g. Very small vocal tern; very like dark Fairy Tern, but *dark primaries contrast with rest of upperwing*. Flight erratic with rapid deep wingbeats, often hovers. Breeding adult has white sloping forehead and sharp recess to just behind eye; black crown, nape and line through eye to yellow bill with black tip; upperparts pale grey, darker on wingtips with outermost 2–3 primaries black; deeply forked white tail; underparts white; legs orange-yellow. In non-breeding plumage (seen in NZ summer), cap recedes to band from eye to eye around back of head and down nape; bill dull yellow, dusky at tip; legs dull yellow. Immature similar, but bill black and dark leading edge to wing prominent as dark shoulder (carpal) bar at rest; some retain brown feather tips on upperparts; legs blackish brown. Flight call a sharp chattering 'kik, kik, kik . . .' and a rasping 'kree-ik'. **Habitat:** Breeds widely in Northern Hemisphere and Australia. Most in NZ are in non-breeding plumage in Oct–Mar, probably migrants from E Asia. Single birds and small flocks regularly seen at NZ estuaries or coastal lakes, mainly at North I harbours, especially Firth of Thames. [Sp 245]



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.

245. LITTLE TERN *Sterna albifrons*

Plate 57

Size: 25 cm, 50 g

Geographical variation: Several subspecies, of which the Eastern Little Tern *sinensis* breeds from southeastern Asia to Australia, and reaches New Zealand.

Distribution: Breed worldwide in North America, Africa, Europe, Asia and Australasia. Eastern Little Terns *sinensis* breed on the eastern and southern coasts of Australia south to Tasmania, as well as in Japan, Korea, China, Taiwan, the Lesser Sunda Islands, New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. The arrival in September of Little Terns in Australasia, including a tern banded as a nestling in Japan and recovered in New Guinea, shows that many eastern Asian birds head south in the northern winter. Some of these Asian birds reach New Zealand as annual migrants,

arriving in October–November and gaining breeding plumage in February–April as they are about to leave. They favour the large harbours of Northland and South Auckland, especially Rangaunu and Kaipara Harbours, and some visit estuaries and coastal lagoons south to Stewart Island, and at Chatham Island (1997–98). A few overwinter.

Population: In New Zealand, the summer total is probably 150–200 birds.

Behaviour: Gregarious; at high tide, Little Terns may roost loosely together near wader flocks, such as Bar-tailed Godwits and Knots, but they may feed over high tide and so, appearing only when the tide is falling, can easily be missed. Their foods and feeding behaviour is similar to the Fairy Tern, except Little Terns chatter while hovering to feed.