

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.

COMMON TERN *Sterna hirundo*

Rare Arctic migrant

36 cm, 120 g. Like small dark White-fronted Tern, but bill shorter and finer; legs rather long. At rest, deeply forked tail even with or slightly shorter than wings. Breeding adult has black cap sloping down to black bill with dull red base; pearl-grey underparts. In flight, outermost 3-4 dark grey primaries contrast with paler grey inner primaries, which appear as a translucent patch against the light, diffuse trailing edge to tip of underwings; dark outer edge to tail; reddish-black legs. In non-breeding plumage, black cap recedes to level of eye; underparts white; many have prominent carpal bar at rest; bill black; legs reddish black. Immature similar, but primaries darker, and tertials often have brownish tips. Flight more buoyant than White-fronted Tern, wingbeats faster and deeper. Feeds by plunge-diving; frequently hovers. Calls a short 'kik' and a raspy 'kreer'. **Habitat:** Breeds subarctic. Migrates to temperate oceans. Only a few identified in NZ, mainly from North I coasts or coastal lakes. [Sp 247]



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 plunge-diving 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.

247. COMMON TERN *Sterna hirundo*

Plate 55

Size: 36 cm, 120 g
Geographical variation: Three or four subspecies, some probably clinal rather than subspecies: *hirundo* breeds in North America and Europe, *minussensis* in central and southern Siberia, *tibetana* in central Asia, and *longipennis* in eastern Asia and is the form most likely to reach New Zealand, although *hirundo* has also been recorded in Australia.
Distribution: Breed in eastern North America and across temperate Europe and Asia. Eastern Common Terns *longipennis* breed in northern Asia eastwards from Lake Baikal. They winter from eastern India to Australasia. Since the 1960s, they have become common-

place in northern and eastern Australia and New Guinea each summer, where flocks come ashore to roost. In New Zealand, one was recorded at Lake Horowhenua (1977), but the first positive sighting was of an adult in breeding plumage with White-fronted Terns at the mouth of the Rangitaiki River, Bay of Plenty (1984). Singles have subsequently been seen almost annually, mainly in the Bay of Plenty and on the Kapiti/Horowhenua coast.
Behaviour: Gregarious; often joining roosting flocks of White-fronted Terns, in which they are easily overlooked.

Reading: Latham, P.C.M. 1986. *Notornis* 33: 69-76.