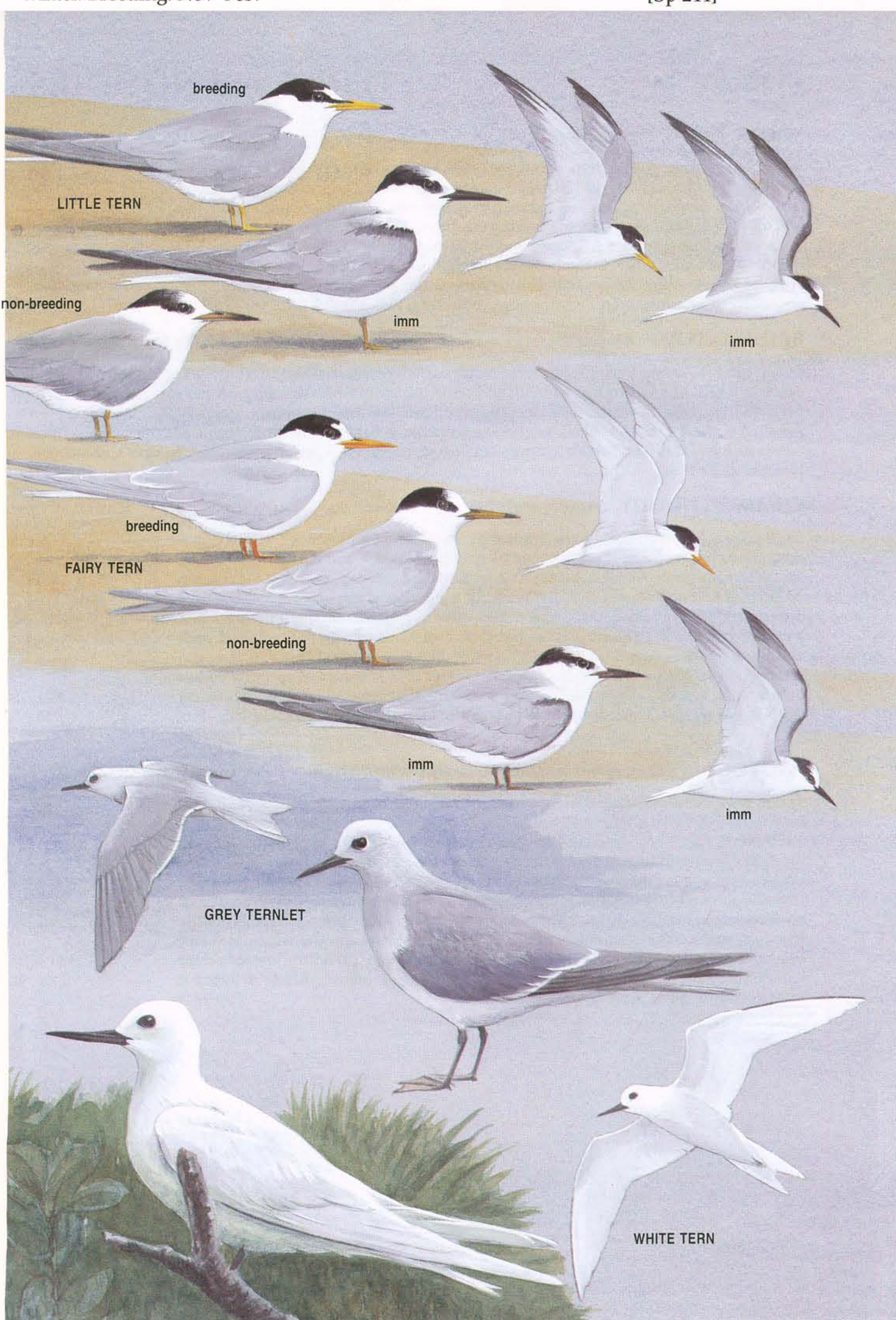


Gulls, terns and noddies are a large cosmopolitan group of mainly coastal birds. Most have short straight bills and short legs. Sexes alike. Usually grey, black or brown above, and white below in adults; juveniles usually have brown barring on back and wings. Bill and legs are often brightly coloured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

**FAIRY TERN** *Sterna nereis*

Rare native

25 cm, 70 g. Very small tern, very like pale Little Tern but *upperwing almost uniform pale grey*. Flight erratic with rapid deep wingbeats; often hovers. Breeding adult (Oct–Mar) has white *steep forehead* and *rounded recess to above eye*; black crown, nape and *line to eye*; white feathering between eye and *pure yellow-orange bill*; upperparts uniform pale grey; deeply forked white tail; underparts white; legs orange-yellow. In non-breeding plumage, cap recedes to above eye and down nape; bill orange-brown, dusky at tip and base; legs dull orange. Immature similar, but bill black with dusky-yellow base, thin *dark leading edge to wing* faintly visible as dark shoulder (carpal) bar at rest; legs brown. Flight call a high-pitched 'zweit'. **Habitat:** Breeds Australia, New Caledonia and NZ. The NZ subspecies, which is endangered, breeds on a few Northland sandspits, and feeds on nearby estuaries, especially Kaipara Harbour in winter. **Breeding:** Nov–Feb. [Sp 244]



**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.

**244. FAIRY TERN** *Sterna nereis*

Plate 57

**Size:** 25 cm, 70 g  
**Geographical variation:** Three subspecies: *nereis* breeds in southern and western Australia, *exsul* in New Caledonia, and the New Zealand Fairy Tern *davisae* in New Zealand.  
**Distribution:** Fairy Terns are the smallest and rarest of the terns that breed in New Zealand. Up to the early 1900s, they were apparently widespread and bred on the coasts of the North Island and inland on the riverbeds of the South Island. By the 1950s, about 18 pairs were confined to Northland, breeding in the

east from Skull Creek (Whangarei Harbour) in the north to Pakiri in the south, including Ruakaka, Waipu, Mangawhai and Te Arai. Some were discovered breeding on the west coast at Papakanui Spit (South Kaipara Head) in 1969. Fairy Terns are now largely confined to Northland and the Kaipara Harbour, and since 1985 have bred at three sites only: Waipu Estuary (maximum of three pairs), Mangawhai Heads (maximum of five pairs), and Papakanui Spit, South Kaipara Heads (two or three pairs). The eastern birds form flocks

at or near the breeding places from late December to the end of March, and then move to the Kaipara Harbour for the winter, although a few single birds have been seen as far afield as Sulphur Point, Tauranga. Flocks of 8–18 birds are regularly seen from late February to July on the Kaipara Harbour, mostly at Taporā, or at Papakanui Spit, where breeding birds probably stay all year. In July, flocks disband and birds return to their eastern coast breeding places.

**Population:** The New Zealand total in 2001 was c. 30 birds, comprising 13 breeding birds and 17 immatures.

**Conservation:** Protected native; the endemic subspecies is critically endangered. The decline of New Zealand Fairy Terns was largely a result of degradation of the breeding habitat, disturbance by people during the breeding season and probably predation by gulls and introduced mammals. Fairy Terns nest in exposed areas of mobile sand, and so their habitat is degraded when sand is stabilised by plantings of marram, lupins and pines, or levelled for housing development. Fairy Terns nest on beaches used by people and frequented by gulls, cats, mustelids and dogs. Protection by trapping mammals, erecting temporary fences and signs, and regular patrols by wardens resulted in the

population increasing from three pairs in 1983 to nine pairs in 1994. Rescued eggs are hatched at Auckland Zoo and the juveniles subsequently liberated.

**Breeding:** Fairy Terns nest solitarily. Nests are on low-lying sand and shell, mostly above the reach of spring tides but exposed to storm surges. First clutches are laid from mid-November to early December, but they may re-lay through to mid-January if earlier clutches are lost. They lay 1–2 buff eggs (35 x 25 mm, 13 g), spotted and blotched dark brown. Both adults incubate for 23–25 days. Young fly at 22–23 days old. The oldest Fairy Tern recorded in New Zealand lived at least 11 years.

**Behaviour:** Solitary when breeding, but several pairs may inhabit the same sandspit. They flock shortly after breeding and stay in small feeding and roosting flocks through the winter. Fairy Terns are generally silent in flight.

**Feeding:** Diet is mainly small fish, caught inside the estuaries and at sea just beyond the breaking waves. When feeding, they flutter, hover, and then plunge-dive to catch their prey.

**Reading:** Parrish, G.R. & Pulham, G.A. 1995. *Tane* 35: 161–173; 175–181.