

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.

ANTARCTIC TERN *Sterna vittata*

Locally common native

36 cm, 140 g. Medium-sized tern with white rump and forked tail. Breeding adult has black cap down to red bill; white cheeks; even grey body; wings grey with black only on the outer web of the outer primary; legs red. Non-breeding adult similar, but cap recedes to just behind eye; underparts white; bill dull pinkish red. Juvenile initially marked brown and white on back; bill dark brown, legs dull reddish. In flight, thinner-winged and more delicate than White-fronted Tern, and wings lack dark markings. Feeds by dipping and plunge-diving. **Habitat:** Breeds circumpolar subantarctic, including NZ subantarctic south of Stewart I. Stays close to breeding sites and not recorded off mainland. **Breeding:** Sep–Apr. [Sp 243]



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.

243. ANTARCTIC TERN *Sterna vittata*

Plate 55

Size: 36 cm, 140 g

Geographical variation: Of several subspecies, *bethunei* breeds in the New Zealand region.

Distribution: Circumpolar in the Southern Hemisphere, breeding on the Antarctic Peninsula south of Argentina, on islands of the South Atlantic and South Indian Oceans, and on subantarctic islands of Australia and New Zealand. In the New Zealand region, they breed on islands off Stewart Island (islands in Port Pegasus, and Stage, Solomon and Moggy Islands), The Snares, Auckland, Campbell, Antipodes and Bounty Islands. At the northern breeding sites, adults and young stay in nearby coastal waters all year, but further south they are absent in April–October, apparently in the southern oceans, as the only Antarctic Tern recorded north of Foveaux Strait was at the Chathams in 1997.

Population: c. 1000 breeding pairs in New Zealand, fairly evenly spread through the subantarctic.

Conservation: Protected native. Populations in the subantarctic appear to be secure as long as rats and cats do not reach their breeding grounds.

Breeding: Colonial whenever possible but usually in small groups. On The Snares, they are mostly solitary on cliff ledges overlooking the sea; on the Auckland and Campbell Islands they nest on rocks close to the sea and in areas of scrub well inland. Laying is

prolonged and varies from island to island: September–March on The Snares, October–February on Campbell Island, December–March on Antipodes Island, and November–February on the Auckland Islands. The nest is a scrape or a depression on the ground or on a ledge. They lay 1–2 buff-olive eggs (46 x 32 mm, 25 g) with brown and black blotches. Both adults incubate for 24–25 days. In 2-egg clutches, the eggs hatch 2–3 days apart, or the second egg does not hatch. The fledging period is 27–32 days. Young can first breed at 3 years old. The oldest bird recorded in New Zealand lived at least 14 years.

Behaviour: Gregarious; feeding and roosting in small flocks of up to 100 birds.

Feeding: Antarctic Terns feed close inshore, taking fish and crustaceans. Their feeding methods vary depending on the prey type and sea conditions. In calm seas, they feed on crustaceans by contact-dipping (i.e. submerging the bill only) or take fish by plunge-diving to become completely or partially submerged. As seas become rough, they mainly contact-dip to take crustaceans and small fish, but may also partially plunge for crustaceans and plunge for fish.

Reading: Robertson, C.J.R. & Bell, B.D. 1984. In Croxall, J.P. et al. (eds). *Status and Conservation of the World's Seabirds*. Cambridge: ICBP. Sadleir, R.M.F.S. et al. 1986. *Notornis* 33: 264–265. Sagar, P.M. 1978. *Notornis* 25: 59–70. Sagar, P.M. & Sagar, J.L. 1989. *Notornis* 36: 171–182.