Fairy tern chick ~ before it can fly *K. Hansen*

Predators

Eggs and chicks can be preyed upon by introduced mammalian predators such as cats, rats, ferrets, stoats, weasels and hedgehogs. Native predators such as black-backed gulls and harrier hawks can also prey upon eggs and chicks.

With their only defence against predators being to keep still or freeze, chicks rely on their mottled grey and rust-brown feathers blending into the coastal habitat for camouflage. Unfortunately cryptic colouration does not keep chicks safe from mammalian predators that hunt using their keen sense of smell.

Threats

Stormy weather can cause adult fairy terns to abandon nests while high tides can wash nests away.

Nests can fail if parent birds are disturbed from incubating eggs or brooding chicks. Left unattended, eggs and chicks are vulnerable to chilling or over-heating depending on the weather conditions.

People's recreational activities and pets can disturb nesting birds. Dogs can eat eggs and chase or kill chicks. Vehicles and horses can crush eggs and chicks.

You can help!

Please watch out for signposts that indicate areas where New Zealand fairy terns and other shorebirds nest.

- Keep dogs, vehicles and horses away.
- Respect fenced-off nesting areas.
- Light no fires.
- If fishing, remove bait or fish remains from the beach to deter scavenging black-backed gulls.
- Take an active interest in the birds' welfare and encourage other people to care as well!

Signs like this are used at nesting areas.

For further information contact the Department of Conservation:
Warkworth Area Office (09) 425 7812
Whangarei Area Office (09) 470 3304
For conservation emergencies such as injured wildlife, strandings or illegal activities phone **0800 362 468.**
www.doc.govt.nz

Published by The Department of Conservation
Produced by No9 Communications. Reprint 2007

New Zealand **Fairy Tern**

Tara-iti

B. Chudleigh

Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

Adult fairy tern in flight *K. Hansen*

New Zealand Fairy Tern

Tara-iti
Sterna nereis davisae

The New Zealand fairy tern is one of our rarest birds with a population of around 45 individuals and less than 12 breeding pairs. Their decline is due to a combination of habitat loss, predation, and disturbance during their breeding season.

The New Zealand fairy tern is the smallest tern that breeds in New Zealand. Adults are at their most colourful during the breeding season with black caps, bright yellow beaks, orange legs, soft grey wings and white underparts. In non-breeding plumage the cap fades to a mottled black and white, and the bill and legs lose their brightness.

Nearly all New Zealand fairy terns are banded. Individuals can be identified by their unique metal and coloured plastic leg bands.

Banded adult in breeding plumage *B. Chudleigh*

Distribution

Once widespread around North Island coasts and the eastern South Island, breeding is now restricted to four sites: **Waipu**, **Mangawhai**, **Pakiri** and **Papakanui Spit**. Outside of the breeding season, fairy terns usually flock together on the Kaipara Harbour.

Recovery

The New Zealand fairy tern has teetered on the brink of extinction since the 1970s. The population plummeted to three pairs in 1984 at which time urgently needed nest protection began at the three remaining nesting areas.

The population has increased slowly since then due to the introduction of wardens and volunteers who maintain fences around nesting areas and trap predators. In recent years management techniques have involved transferring eggs and chicks between nests to maximise productivity, with Auckland Zoo providing incubation facilities.

Eggs in nest scrape *R. Parrish*

Nesting

New Zealand fairy terns nest between **October** and **February** with pairs having up to three attempts if nests fail. Each nest, consisting of a shallow scrape in the sand, usually contains just one or two eggs. The eggs are well camouflaged among sea-shells.

Both parents take turns at incubating, with the eggs hatching after 21 days. Chicks are fed small fish by both parents. About three weeks after hatching they start experimenting with flight but continue to depend on their parents for food until they learn to hover then dive for fish themselves.

Parents vigorously defend nests and chicks against intruders such as humans, other shorebirds or predators. They do this by calling, dive-bombing and defecating!

Young chicks *R. Parrish*