

White Tern

Gygis alba (Sparrman, 1786)

Other common names White Noddy, Fairy Tern, Love Tern

Conservation status

The White Tern is listed as a **Vulnerable Species** on Schedule 2 of the New South Wales *Threatened Species Conservation Act, 1995* (TSC Act).

Description (summarised from Higgins & Davies 1996)

Length
28-33cm
Wing
23-26cm
Wingspan
66-78cm
Tail
10-12cm
Bill
37-46mm
Tarsus
12-18cm
Weight
100-140g

With its wholly white plumage, the White Tern is unique among terns. The feathers are so white that the wings may appear translucent in flight. The species is a medium sized tern, which has no plumage variation during breeding. The tail is long with a shallow fork. The bill, eyes and eye rings are black and the legs and feet are greyish. Individuals are faintly smudged with ginger colour around the head and on the back and wings.

The principal call of the White Tern is a repeated guttural *heecheechee*. Adult and young White Terns are generally quiet at the nest site.

Distribution

The White Tern occurs transglobally throughout tropical and sub-tropical oceans and islands. Individuals occasionally visit the east coast of Australia between Cape York Peninsula and Sydney, generally only coming ashore as a result of stormy weather (Higgins & Davies 1996; Pringle 1987).

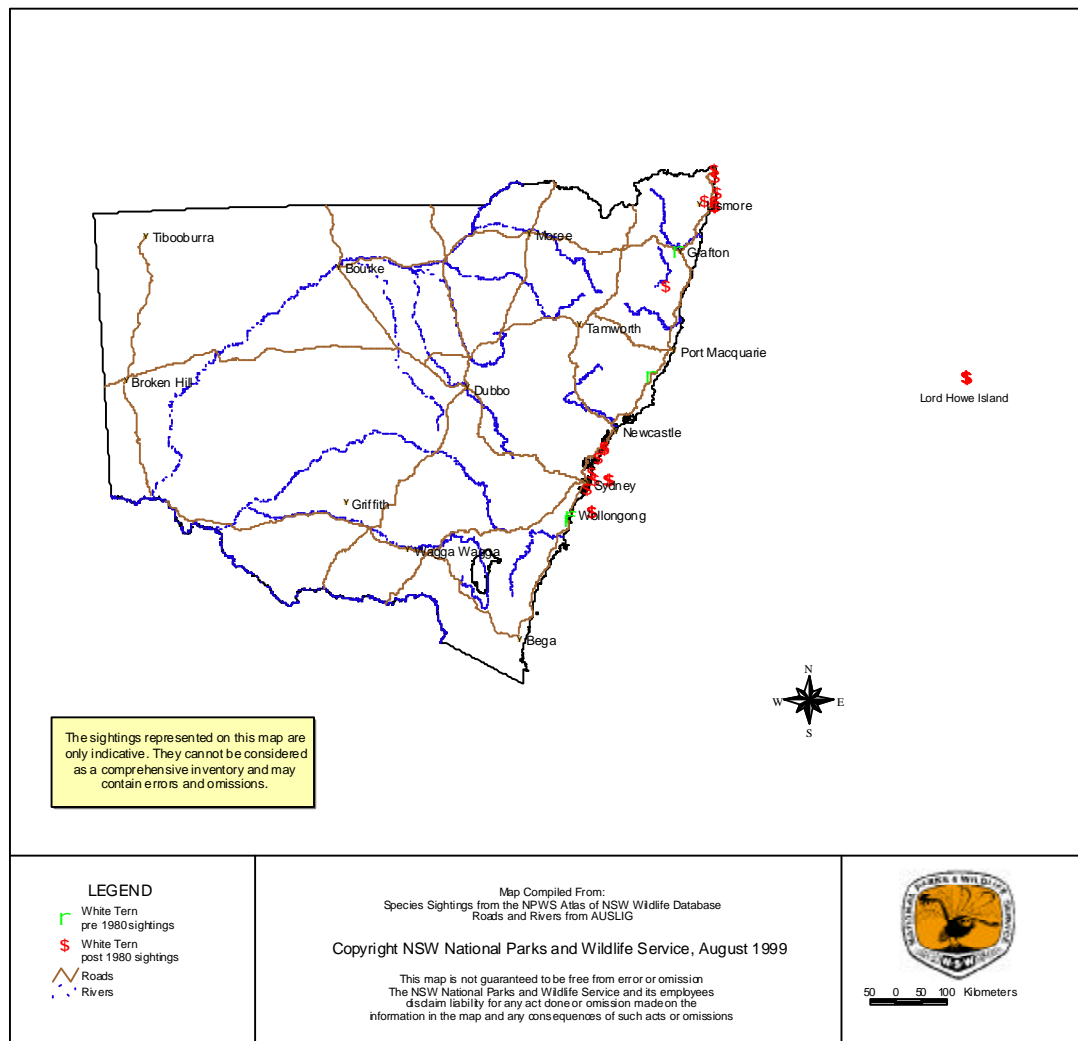
Within NSW, White Terns are regularly recorded off the coast at Ballina and occasionally off Sydney and Wollongong (Cooper & Forshaw 1977). The species is present on Lord Howe Island from September to June, dispersing when the winter gales arrive. A breeding colony of 2000 pairs exist at Norfolk Island and another of up to 100 pairs at Lord Howe Island.



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NPWS records of the White Tern in NSW

The Lord Howe Island colony is a recent natural colony that began in 1943 with the first breeding record in 1967 (Hutton 1991; Higgins & Davies 1996).

Recorded occurrences in conservation reserves

Lord Howe Island World Heritage Area (NPWS 1999).

Habitat

The White Tern is pelagic and, although the non-breeding range is unknown, the species is generally thought to disperse into oceanic areas relatively close to breeding islands. The

species is migratory or dispersive and often encountered singly or in small groups (Pringle 1987). Individuals are not usually associated with other terns or noddies.

Breeding usually occurs in coastal tall open forest up to 1km inland (Higgins & Davies 1996). Favoured nesting sites including the high branches of the Norfolk Island Pine and Sallwood. Occasionally, eggs may be laid on suitable branches in other trees such as, Blackbutt, Greybark, Banyan or Pandanus (Hutton 1991).

Ecology

The White Tern is diurnal, although dusk and dawn are probably important feeding times. Individuals feed both inshore and offshore generally dipping their bill to catch prey at or just below the ocean surface (Higgins & Davies 1996). White Terns have frequently been observed returning to their nesting tree with five or six fish held crosswise in their bill, indicating that they have the necessary skill to catch fish with their bill while already holding others (Pringle 1987). Feeding is generally solitary but may occur with mixed species flocks. The White Tern's diet generally includes fish and other small aquatic animals that are 2-8 cm long, however, individuals have been observed hawking for cicadas over the forest (Hutton 1991).

White Terns may roost at night and during the day in trees on breeding islands. Roost trees may be selected as nest sites. Nest sites are bare branches, stems or fronds where there is sufficient flat or concave space to prevent eggs from falling. No nest is made but bark may be scratched away with feet and discarded with the bill. This precarious placement of the egg makes it particularly susceptible to high winds. Individuals appear to breed at almost any time of the year and breeding behaviour may vary considerably throughout the species range (Pringle 1987).

On Lord Howe Island and Norfolk Island laying occurs in spring and summer. Both parents incubate a single egg for at least 28 days and care for the young. Fledging occurs at 60 to 75 days and then juveniles accompany parents to forage at sea (Tarburton 1984).

Threats

- Stochastic events impacting upon small populations
- Strong winds, dislodging the precariously placed egg
- Predation by cats, the Nankeen Kestrel, the Masked Owl and the Pied Currawong
- On Norfolk Island the introduced Black Ant may attack young

Management

- Protection and maintenance of known and potential habitat
- Control of feral animals in habitat areas

Recovery plans

A recovery plan has not been prepared for the species.



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