

Greater Crested Tern

Thalasseus bergii

#5 MAY 2025



Hunter Bird
Observers Club

Affiliated with BirdLife Australia



Adult Greater Crested Terns in breeding plumage, during courtship (photo: Rebecca Citroni)

General Comments

This is a large tern with a yellow bill (sometimes it is orange-tinged) and, when breeding, a shaggy black crown that does not extend all the way to the bill (unlike how it does for the Lesser Crested Tern of northern Australia). The upper parts are dark grey – much darker than for similarly-sized terns such as Caspian and Australian Gull-billed. Non-breeding plumaged adult birds have a white forehead and streaky grey crown, darkening towards the nape. Males and females appear similar, and both incubate.

Juvenile birds have mottled brown and white plumage, and a dark tail. As they progress through their immature stages, the mottled pattern gradually is replaced by dark grey and the tail turns dark grey. It takes two years to reach full adult plumage, although there are some records of birds breeding toward the end of their first year.

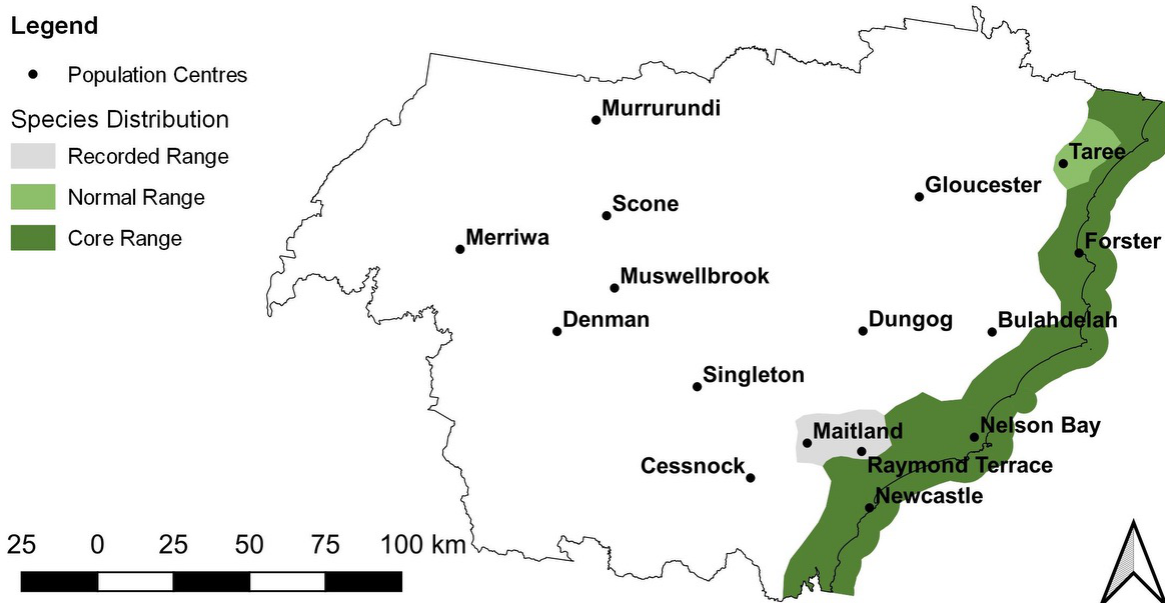


Greater Crested Tern in non-breeding plumage (photo: Marg Clarke)

Regional Status

The Greater Crested Tern is a common resident of the Hunter Region, and it is easily the most common here of any of the tern species. It is mainly seen coastally or at sea – including regularly in small numbers at the continental shelf. The Port Stephens and Manning River estuaries host by far the greatest numbers – about 200 hundred birds roosting on average in the Manning and about 150 birds on average in Port Stephens. The two sites have had highest counts of ~700 birds and 424 birds, respectively. The counts in Port Stephens are about 3-fold higher in the summer (February) surveys than the winter ones. That accords with the NSW & ACT Atlas observation that local numbers are augmented by birds dispersing from breeding colonies elsewhere in Australia.

The NSW & ACT Atlas reported that Greater Crested Terns bred colonially on offshore islands in NSW, only rarely in estuaries. The only breeding records for the Hunter Region (ignoring reports of adults feeding fledged youngsters at mainland sites) are from offshore islands. Moon Island apparently hosts up to 300 pairs (NB there have been no reports of visits there since 2010). Intermittently there are smaller colonies that form on Broughton Island and elsewhere, e.g. Stasis Island near Seal Rocks.



Distribution of the Greater Crested Tern in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams).

Sub-species

Greater Crested Terns range from South Africa around the Indian Ocean to the central Pacific and Australia. The local subspecies is *cristatus*, the Australasian Greater Crested Tern, which is distributed around the western Pacific Ocean. The other three subspecies are *bergii* (southern Africa), *thalassinus* (eastern Africa) and *velox* (northern Indian Ocean).

About the name

Greater Crested Tern

The origin of “tern” is obscure but it probably derives from the old Norse word perno (see the June 2024 Featured Bird (the Caspian Tern) for a bit more information). The “crested terns” are a worldwide genus of eight species of medium-large to large terns in the family *Laridae*. The marginally biggest of the eight species was long-known in its range outside of Australia as the Greater Crested Tern. The marginally smallest of the eight species in the genus, and the only other species occurring in Australia, is the Lesser Crested Tern.

Until recently in Australia, it was known as the Crested Tern, but the common name has been changed so as to become consistent with the naming practice everywhere else.

Thalasseus bergii

The genus name is from the Greek word *thalasseus*, meaning fisherman,

while the scientific name *bergii* honours Karl Bergius, a German-born collector who obtained the type specimen while he was working in southern Africa in the early 19th Century.



An immature Greater Crested Tern (photo: Steve Merrett)

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 Text by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of BirdLife Australia's HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Volumes 1-3 of the NSW Field Atlassers' Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names. A Complete Guide.

Information in this fact sheet is provided exclusively to members of the Hunter Bird Observers Club. Back-copies are archived at <https://www.hboc.org.au/membership/featured-bird/>



© Copyright [2025] Hunter Bird Observers Club www.hboc.org.au

You are receiving this email as you are a member of the Hunter Bird Observers Club

[Unsubscribe](#) • [Update Email Address](#) • [View Online](#)