

Little Tern

Sternula albifrons

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A Little Tern (subspecies *placens*) in breeding plumage at Hawks Nest (photo: Dick Jenkin)

Little Terns are unmistakable, particularly when they hover noisily over a potential intruder or before they plunge into the sea to catch a fish. In breeding plumage they are striking birds, with all-white underparts, grey upperparts, black nape and crown, yellow legs, and yellow bill with a black tip. A black loreal stripe runs from the eye to the bill. Non-breeding birds look similar but they have a black bill and a large white cap, and they lack the loreal stripe.

The main potential confusion species is the Fairy Tern, which is a rare vagrant in the Hunter Region but the ranges overlap in southern NSW. Fairy Terns are somewhat larger. In breeding plumage they lack a loreal stripe, have a larger white patch on the head (the lores and forehead) and their bill is all-yellow i.e. there is no black tip. Differentiating non-breeding birds of the two species is

more difficult, however, in flight both breeding and non-breeding Little Terns have a dark carpal bar (absent in Fairy Tern) and their outer primaries are blackish (whereas Fairy Terns just show a faint contrast).

Juveniles resemble non-breeding adult birds but their upper parts have black scalloping and the crown is streaky black. For a while after first fledging, juveniles also have buff patches on their face and crown.



A Little Tern (subspecies *placens*) at Stockton Sandspit – note the dark carpal bar and dark primaries visible in flight (photo: Rebecca Citroni)

Regional Status

Little Terns spend spring/summer on the beaches and estuaries of the Hunter Region. Typically they first arrive in November and depart again in March. Small numbers can occur anywhere. The largest numbers occur in the Manning Estuary and the nearby beaches – usually there are many hundreds of Little Terns present and often there are more than 500 birds. Those numbers include birds of the breeding and non-breeding subspecies (see details below). The breeding population in the Manning is large but unfortunately their breeding success rate is patchy.

Sometimes, there are breeding colonies in Port Stephens (at Winda Woppa or Corrie Island), and along Newcastle Bight (Fern Bay and the Worimi Conservation Lands). Historically there was a large colony near Forster, and

birds sometimes try to breed around Lake Macquarie.

The number of birds around the Hunter Estuary declined substantially in the 1980s and 1990s, from peak counts of 600-700 birds (Lindsey & Stuart in prep.).

Breeding Blues

One of the reasons that the Little Tern is classified as Endangered in NSW is its poor rate of breeding success: on average, it is well below 20% (source Australian Government Department of Agriculture, Water and Environment 2022). There are many reasons for this – mainly predation and disturbance by people and dogs. Severe weather events also take their toll – the nests are a scrape in the sand just above sea level; storms and king tides can be devastating particularly in combination. However, predation is the main factor. For example, predation by Foxes destroyed all the eggs/chicks in the Manning estuary in 2017 (2017 ABR), while Ghost Crabs killed almost all of the chicks in the 2022 Newcastle Bight colony (The Whistler 2023).

Each breeding season now, there is considerable effort by volunteers and NRM staff to erect fences around the colonies and then to manage public access. Those efforts undoubtedly help to reduce the amount of disturbance, but they have little impact in addressing predation and severe weather events.



An immature Little Tern (subspecies *placens*) in the Manning Estuary (photo: Alwyn Simple)

Sub-species

Authorities differ as to how many subspecies there are of Little Tern, but there are at least three: the nominate *albifrons*, found mainly in Europe, *guineae*, found in Africa and *sinensis*, found in Asia, Australasia and Pacific Islands. Some authorities have split *sinensis* (Indo-Pacific Little Tern) and consider the Australia-breeding birds to be subspecies *placens* (Tasman Little Tern). Usually, such authorities also list subspecies *innominata* and *pusilla* (occurring in parts of Europe and the sub-continent), and some also list *levantinus*.

The separation of *placens* as a discrete subspecies seems sensible. The status of *sinensis* was cloudy, as generally it was considered that there were three populations, all of which bred independently but had some overlap when they were not breeding. As they did not inter-breed, they presumably were genetically isolated from one another, hence potentially were different subspecies or headed towards that.

The birds that we see in breeding plumage are now treated as subspecies *placens*; they breed in eastern and south-eastern Australia during the austral summer; and then depart for the northern hemisphere. The non-breeding-plumaged birds are subspecies *sinensis*, breeding in parts of Asia in the boreal summer and migrating here afterwards, where they co-exist for about six months with the local breeding population of subspecies *placens*.

The regular overlap of breeding and non-breeding birds is intriguing. The non-breeders would be competing for the same food resources as the breeding population, which ordinarily would not be expected to be tolerated. There must be some compensating advantages for the breeding population, for example perhaps the greater overall numbers are helpful in the defence against predators.

About the name

Little Tern

The origin of “tern” is obscure but it probably derives from the old Norse word *perno*, which evolved to become “stern” for the Saxons. All modern Scandinavian languages have words similar to “tern” for birds of this guild. Appropriately, the Little Tern is by far the smallest tern in Australia.

Sternula albifrons

The Latin word for tern was *sterna*: *Sternula* means that is a small one. The genus name is from the Latin words *albus*, dull white, and *frons*, forehead.



A Little Tern (subspecies *sinensis*) in non-breeding plumage on the Central Coast (photo: Leslie Wilson)

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