

Are we losing tara white-fronted terns from northern Aotearoa New Zealand?

Knowing the distribution of seabird breeding colonies and their size and population trends are essential for sound conservation management of seabirds in Aotearoa New Zealand. Unfortunately, such datasets are currently lacking for many seabird species in northern New Zealand. Highly threatened species like fairy tern, black petrel and Buller's shearwater take high priority, but there is the danger that other endemic or native seabirds may slip quietly away, particularly those perceived to be 'common'. The recent media coverage of the decline in red-billed gull populations nationally, as highlighted by Frost & Taylor (2018), is an excellent example of how this can be countered. Tara (white-fronted terns) could prove to be another such species, at least in northern New Zealand, where declines have been detected but not quantified with a thorough census.

The New Zealand population of white-fronted terns has declined markedly over the last 40 years and it is currently regarded as At Risk/Declining under the New Zealand Threat Classification System. There is also concern that it is disappearing from northern Aotearoa New Zealand.



Recent surveys have highlighted the ephemeral nature of this species' breeding: it is here one year, gone the next, historical sites abandoned, new sites occupied. This makes it difficult to identify an overall population trend. To overcome this requires a new survey approach with regular monitoring within a 'study area' that is large enough to cover the possibility of these birds shifting their nest sites from season to season. As a first step towards identifying such a study in the Hauraki Gulf we intend to complete a survey of the whole region this coming season.

Colonies and roost sites will be located during the survey and all previous sites revisited within the wider Hauraki Gulf, with searches made by boat and from shore for any sign of new sites. The Whangarei and Waitemata Harbours will be included, along with estuaries and embayments such as Waipu, Mangawhai and Pakiri in the north and Tamaki Estuary closer to Auckland. Birds NZ members from Northland, Auckland and South Auckland branches will participate in coastline searches and boat surveys. We also have a network of contacts around the region who we can draw on for updates throughout the study period. Funding from Auckland Council has allowed us to work with community groups on seabird restoration within the Hauraki Gulf and they will be encouraging members to search out tern colonies. We will also liaise with the Outboard Boating Clubs in Auckland and Whangarei to ask members to send reports of white-fronted tern roost and nesting sites.

We will be looking for signs of breeding from October as there may be seasonal variation in terms of timing. As the season progresses, we will monitor all the sites found during the survey for breeding success through repeat visits. Muriwai, on Auckland's West Coast, will also be surveyed to provide a comparison of timing and breeding success between Hauraki Gulf and Tasman Sea. In addition, we will continue the diet study we adopted for a recent

DOC Conservation Services Programme contract using photography to identify prey items caught by birds and observations of birds feeding at sea.

Once colonies are located, they will be entered into GIS, counts made, breeding status recorded, and photographs taken. We will make repeat visits through the season to assess breeding success and any threats to each of the colonies.

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