

Tara population in the Hauraki Gulf - Northern New Zealand Seabird Trust

Tara/white-fronted terns are a familiar sight working over the tops of kahawai and trevally schools. Indeed, they are often referred to as the 'kahawai bird'. However, we may be seeing a dramatic decline of this iconic seabird within the Hauraki Gulf.

The New Zealand population of tara has fallen markedly over the last 40 years and it is currently regarded as 'At Risk/Declining'. Tara frequently shift their breeding sites making it difficult to identify population trends. To overcome this requires regular monitoring within a large enough study area to cover changes in nest sites from season to season. With this aim we have completed a baseline survey of tara breeding across the Hauraki Gulf (excluding the southern Firth of Thames).

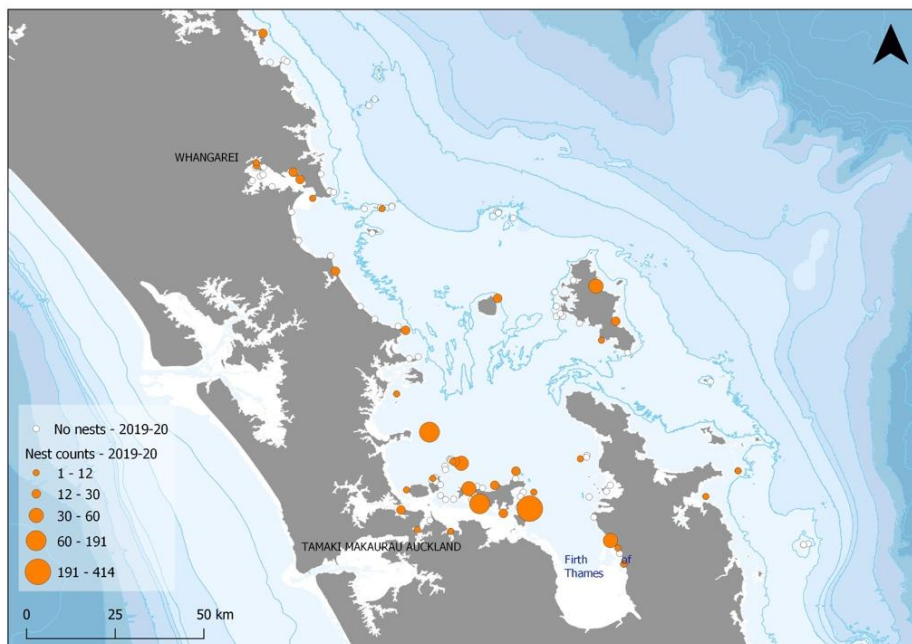


Image by Edin Whitehead

In total 136 potential breeding sites were identified. Forty-five sites had tara present with breeding observed at thirty-nine sites; seventeen of these were previously 'unknown'. A total of 2,250 tara were recorded and 1,342 nests. The largest colonies were 650 birds with 414 nests at Scully's Reef Ponui Island, 200 birds with 191 nests recorded from Tiritiri Matangi, and 171 birds with 141 nests at Koi Island Waiheke. Three significant 'New' colonies of 50 nests or more were found at Oneroa Waiheke, Whangapoua Spit Aotea and Waikawau Coromandel. The vast majority of the 39 breeding sites (28 of 72%) had less than 20 nests and only 6 areas had more than 50 nests. The 2019/20 breeding season for tara appears to have been prolonged with new nests observed into February. This extended season and perhaps a later start to breeding, coupled with the inconsistency with which this species chooses nesting sites, means that we are unlikely to have recorded all nests in our survey.

Black-backed gulls and/or red-billed gulls were present at 28 of the 39 tara nesting sites. These species can clearly co-habit since the gulls had commenced nesting prior to tara arriving, although the two largest colonies had no gulls present at the time of observation. Gulls provoked defensive behaviours from nesting tara and were also observed engaging in kelp parasitism against terns.

To assist with future surveys, we identified seven site clusters within which terns are likely to breed in subsequent seasons. Historical survey records for sites in these clusters was analysed using 1996 as an approximate baseline. The 'expected' number of nests within the identified site clusters was considerably higher than what was recorded in 2019/2020 and this trend is most notable in northern parts of the region. While this methodology is crude for a number of reasons, it suggests that the number of tara nesting in the Hauraki Gulf may have declined dramatically in the past 25 years.



We are grateful to all the volunteers and Birds New Zealand members who assisted with this project. The Seabird Trust has committed funding to repeat the survey in the summer of 2020/2021 using identified site clusters to test this methodology and as the basis for further analysis.