

TARA / WHITE-FRONTED TERN

Diet and population survey, a photographic competition

Last year, the Northern NZ Seabird Trust proposed a nation-wide photo contest and encouraged citizen science participation in the 'Year of the Terns 2022'. The aim of this research project was to gather data about Tara diets around the motu using the non-invasive method of digital photography. Tara are one of the few seabirds we can do this for, and it is an easy way of gathering a lot of good data about what prey they rely on. This was intended as a pilot study to see how much data we could source in one season from photographers around Aotearoa, with the aim of continuing long-term monitoring using this method if successful.

Twenty-seven photographers entered the competition. We received 192 photographs (some were not included for judging as they were outside the 2022-2023 season dates 1 October 2022, 10 February 2023). There were several portfolios of images from colonies, some taken over multiple months, most notably the Waikanae Estuary and Aramoana Mole. Images were collated and presented to the judges without the photographers' names visible, to ensure blind judging of images.



The judges (Edin Whitehead, Tony Whitehead and Neil Fitzgerald) selected this image taken at Shelly Beach, Kaipara Harbour by Axel Mertens as the Best Overall Image. They felt it perfectly encapsulated the core goal of the research project, which was to get identifiable images of Tara prey, as well as being a classically gorgeous portrait.



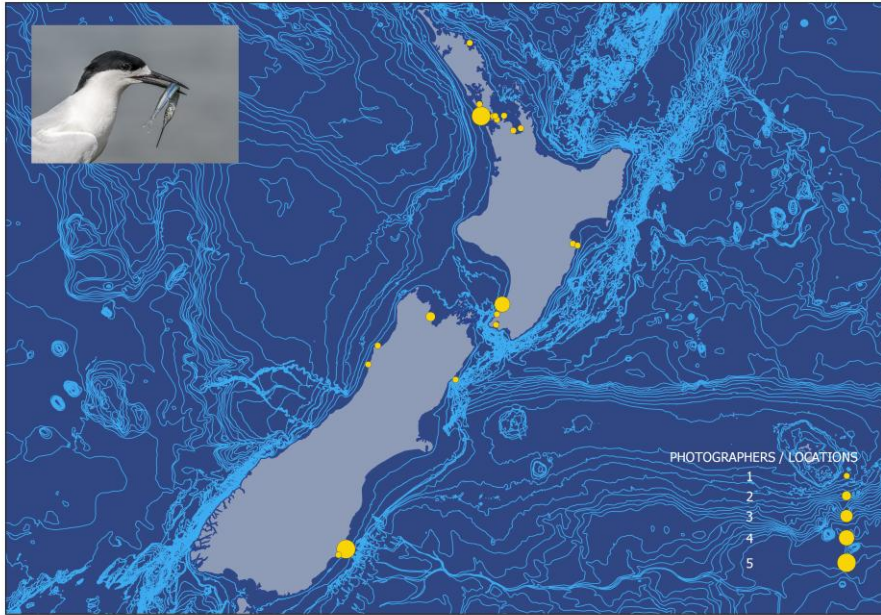
Best Portfolio winner Nick Beckwith, Aramoana Spit.



Most unusual prey – a huhu beetle! Photo by Steve Wood, Motueka Spit.

Prey items were identified by Malcolm Francis and Clinton Duffy who were pleased at the overall quality and range of species. Data can probably be pooled by marine biogeographic region, although there likely aren't enough observations to look at seasonal shifts.

The Birds NZ Research Fund grant received covered some of the competition costs but was used mainly for boat fuel costs to ensure the colony counts for the wider Hauraki Gulf region continued into a fourth season.



Map showing locations where images were taken and number of photographers at each location

While there is fairly good coverage from around the country there are notable areas missing, for example: Northland, Bay of Plenty, Kaikoura, North and South Canterbury, Otago and Rakiura. This is something we would address were the competition and photographic survey repeated.

Chris Gaskin,
28 November 2023