



Little Tern

Sterna albifrons Pallas, 1764

Other common names Sea swallow, White-shafted Ternlet

Conservation status

The Little Tern is listed as an **Endangered Species** on Schedule 1 of the New South Wales *Threatened Species Conservation Act, 1995* (TSC Act). This species is listed as an **Endangered Species** on Schedule 1 of the Commonwealth *Endangered Species Protection Act, 1992*.

Description (summarised from Higgins & Davies 1996)

Length

200-280mm

Wingspan

450-550mm

Tail

80-110mm

Bill

26-32mm

Tarsus

16-18mm

Weight

50g

The Little Tern is a slender, very small, migratory or partly migratory seabird. Grey plumage covers most of the body with the tips of the wings and the head being

predominately black. The wings are very narrow and the tail is moderately long and deeply forked. The tip of the tail falls short of the wing tips at rest.

During the breeding season, the legs, feet and bill change from black to yellow. Further, the heads of breeding birds have a black cap that contrasts with a white forehead. The Little Tern is very similar in size and shape to the Fairy Tern *Sterna nereis*.

The species is very vocal. The usual flight call is a repetitive shrill high-pitched *kik* or *kip* or a high-pitched, slightly rasping, disyllabic *gi-wick* or *kid-ik*.

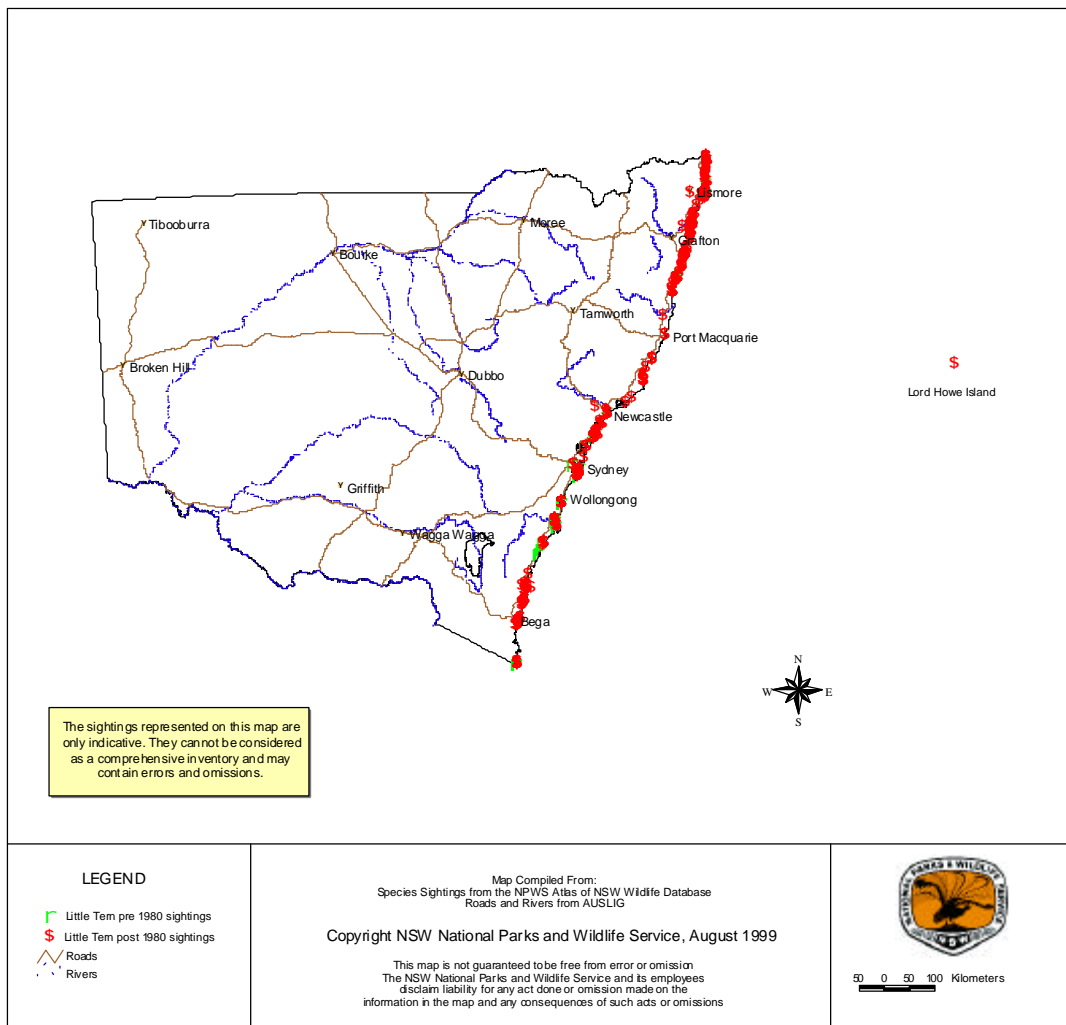
Distribution

In Australia, the Little Tern occurs from Shark Bay in Western Australia, around northern and eastern Australia, to the east coast of Tasmania and around to the Gulf of St Vincent in South Australia. Increased development around estuaries and coastal areas has led to the world-wide decline of Little Terns (Murray 1994).



K Egan/NPWS

Little Tern - breeding adult



NPWS records of the Little Tern in NSW

Within NSW, an eastern subspecies of the Little Tern predominately occurs. This subspecies is migratory, breeding in the spring and summer along the entire east coast from Tasmania to northern Queensland. Migrant individuals are predominately September to May with only occasional birds seen in the winter months (Morris *et al.* 1981). The species was once quite common in NSW, however, recent records indicate that Little Terns now exist in a medium-sized, non-breeding population and a small, threatened breeding population (Chafer & Brandis 1991). The small size of the Australian breeding population is masked by the presence in summer of numerous migrants from populations that breed in eastern Asia.

Recorded occurrences in conservation reserves

Lord Howe Island World Heritage Area, Nadgee NR, Wyrabalong NR, Comerong Island NR, Towra Point NR, Moon Island NR, Kooragang NR, Narrawallee NR, Broadwater NP, Eurobodalla NP, Bongil Bongil NP, Booti Booti NP, Mimosa Rocks NP, Myall Lakes NP, Bournda NP, Yuraygir NP, Bundjalung NP (NPWS 1999).

Habitat

The Little Tern is almost exclusively coastal with sheltered environments preferred. However, the species may also occur several kilometers from the sea in harbours, inlets and rivers (Smith 1990). Occasionally, the

species may be recorded on offshore islands or coral cays (Hill *et al.* 1988). The Little Tern nests in small, scattered colonies on sandy beaches or shingle pits. These nesting sites are particularly vulnerable to human disturbance, predation and natural catastrophes (Garnett 1992; Murray 1994).

Ecology

The Little Tern is carnivorous, preferring small fish but also eating crustaceans, insects, annelids and molluscs (Higgins & Davies 1996). The species forages by plunging in the shallow water of channels and estuaries, and in the surf on beaches (Owen 1991).

Nesting has been recorded at 60 sites along the NSW coastline but only about half of these have been used recently (Smith 1990).

Both parents incubate a clutch of 1-3 eggs for a period of 17-22 days. The newly hatched young is also cared for by both parents during the fledging period of 17–19 days (Smith 1994).

Threats

- Nesting at flood-prone locations
- Predation of eggs and chicks by a range of species including foxes, silver gulls, ravens and whimbrels (Egan 1990; Secomb 1994; Rose 1994)
- Human disturbance by coastal recreational activities; adults leave nests when approached resulting in the chicks or eggs being exposed and vulnerable (Hill *et al.* 1988)
- 4WDs, trail-bikes and walkers may crush nests, eggs and chicks (Hill *et al.* 1988)
- Coastal development, including sand and rutile mining and the establishment of waste disposal dumps and construction (Smith 1990)

- Availability of food affected by modification of drainage patterns including damming of tidal creeks, reclamation of intertidal areas and destruction of seagrass beds, mangroves and saltmarsh (Martindale 1985; Smith 1990)
- Potentially susceptible to pesticides and contamination of estuaries by oil-spills and heavy metals (Hill *et al.* 1988)

Management

- Protection and maintenance of known or potential habitat, including the implementation of protection zones around recent records
- Erection of fences and interpretative signage to minimise human disturbance
- Displacing birds from flood-prone sites by flagging beaches with lines of bunting or raising nests on sandbags (Owen 1991; Murray 1994)
- Control of introduced animals around potential habitat areas including electric fencing
- Local community groups acting as nesting site wardens

Recovery plans

A recovery plan is being prepared for the Little Tern.



Little Tern - juvenile

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