

## TAXON SUMMARY

# Fairy Tern (Australian)

1	Family	Laridae
2	Scientific Name	<i>Sterna nereis nereis</i> Gould, 1843
3	Common Name	Fairy Tern (Australian)
4	Conservation status	Least Concern

### 5 Reasons for listing

The population size is stable, with some local declines in the breeding population offset by increases in range.

	Estimate	Reliability
Extent of occurrence	50,000 km <sup>2</sup>	medium
trend	stable	high
Area of occupancy	500 km <sup>2</sup>	low
trend	stable	medium
No. of breeding birds	6,000	low
trend	stable	low
No. of sub-populations	1	medium
Generation time	5 years	low

### 6 Intraspecific taxa

*S. n. davisae* (New Zealand) and *S. n. exsul* (New Caledonia) extralimital, with one vagrant record of *S. n. exsul*. The subspecies' global status is Least Concern.

### 7 Past range and abundance

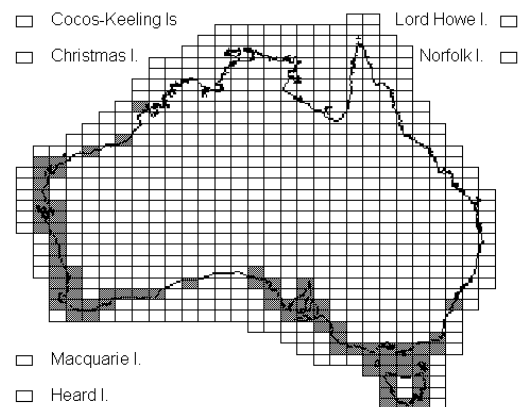
Coasts of Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia, as far north as Dampier Archipelago (Blakers *et al.*, 1984, Higgins and Davies, 1996), with a recent record of a single individual hybridising with Little Tern *S. albigularis sinensis* in New South Wales (Ross *et al.*, 1999).

### 8 Present range and abundance

Since 1970, recorded breeding once in New South Wales (1 site, 1 bird), Victoria (23 sites, minimum of 200 pairs), Tasmania (44 sites, 110 pairs), South Australia (42 sites, 650 pairs) and Western Australia (60 sites, minimum 2,021 pairs; Brothers *et al.*, 1996, Burbidge *et al.*, 1996, Copley, 1996, Higgins and Davies, 1996, Norman *et al.*, 1996, Ross *et al.*, 1999). These are under-estimates as many sites will not have been recorded. Although numbers at some regularly surveyed sites in Port Phillip Bay, Vic. have decreased (Menkhorst *et al.*, 1988, C. Minton), the species has extended its distribution east to sites in Gippsland (Norman *et al.*, 1996) and New South Wales (Ross *et al.*, 1999). In Western Australia, numbers at Rottneet I. have remained stable since 1930s (Saunders and de Rebeira, 1993) while sightings of flocks of 700 individuals (Burbidge *et al.*, 1996) suggest breeding population larger than recorded.

### 9 Ecology

The Fairy Tern feeds in inshore waters around island archipelagos and on the Australian mainland. It lays 1-2 eggs in a sand scrape. The subspecies nests in small colonies on coral shingle on continental islands or coral cays, on sandy islands and beaches inside estuaries, and on open sandy beaches (Hill *et al.*, 1988, Higgins and Davies, 1996). Colonies tend to occupy areas rather than fixed sites, and nest sites are often abandoned after one year, even if they have been successful (Saunders and de Rebeira, 1985). Natural rates of nest failure are probably high; in Victoria sites at Corner Inlet were either flooded by high tides or smothered by wind-blown sand every year for 10 years. Nest sites are also often overgrown by vegetation (C. Minton).



### 10 Threats

The high natural rate of breeding failure has been increased by new threats since the arrival of Europeans, particularly near centres of human settlement. Nest sites are sometimes destroyed, abandoned as a direct result of human disturbance or succumb to predators associated with humans such as dogs, Black Rats *Rattus rattus*, Silver Gulls *Larus novaehollandiae* or ravens *Corvus* spp. (Saunders and de Rebeira, 1985, Hill *et al.*, 1988). On the mainland, foxes may be a significant predator (Higgins *et al.*, 1996). Interbreeding has been recorded between this subspecies and the Little Tern in South Australia (Cox and Close, 1977), Victoria (Norman *et al.*, 1996) and New South Wales (Ross *et al.*, 1999) and may constitute a threat to the genetic integrity of the two taxa in the future. Notwithstanding threats, active management of breeding sites has resulted in an

increased population size and breeding success, at least in Victoria and New South Wales, with an expansion of breeding range (Ross *et al.*, 1999). Also, numerous birds breed on many scattered remote islands in Western Australia (Burbidge and Fuller, 1996), where they are not threatened.

## 11 Recommended actions

- 11.1 Continued management of nest sites in areas with high rates of disturbance.
- 11.2 Monitor sites in south-eastern Australia for hybrids with Little Tern.

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### Comments received from

Allan Burbidge, Andrew Burbidge, Richard Hill, Peter Menkhorst.