



FACTSHEET

Fairy Tern



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Common Name: Fairy Tern

Scientific Name: *Sternula nereis*

Conservation Status: Listed as Vulnerable under ICUN (2014). Listed as Vulnerable under WA Wildlife Conservation Act 1950 (2015). All Rottnest Island's fauna is protected under the *Rottnest Island Authority Act 1987*.

Habitat: Wetlands, Coastal habitat.

Body length: 22-27 cm

Weight: 57-85 g

Gestation period: 18 days

Number of young: 1-3 (1-3 eggs)

Description:

The Fairy Tern is one of the smallest, (second only to the Little Tern, *S. albifrons*) and most elegant of the Australian terns. Its upper surfaces are very pale grey. The top of its head and back of its neck are black. It has a white forehead. The bird's under surfaces are white. It has a yellow bill, brown eyes, and orange legs.

Diet:

Fish (rarely plant material, crustaceans, snails).

In the Wild:

The Fairy Tern is a common breeding visitor to Rottnest Island. These birds arrive in spring, breed over the summer and leave in the autumn. They are noisy and easy to spot as they keep up a constant chittering as they forage and fly to and from their breeding colonies. These colonies can be different sizes ranging from 2 to 400 pairs.

These birds nest on sheltered sandy beaches, spits and banks above the high tide line and below the vegetation line. A Fairy Tern's nest is a shallow scrape in the sand which tends to be lined with small shells and plant material. Their nests also have a clear view down to the water.

The type of nest and nesting site make these birds very vulnerable to disturbance. They can be disturbed by natural events such as storms and very high tides which flood or bury their nests with sand.



However, human activity such as trampling and noise is the main problem.

You may often see these birds in small groups flying close to the shore as they search for fish. They catch these fish by diving into the water with their wings in a steep V-shape. Fairy Terns have been seen diving from up to five metres in the air. Once they have caught their food, they swallow their fish head-first.

Threats:

- Human activity and disturbance to breeding areas
- Extreme weather events
- Pest birds (particularly Silver Gulls and Ravens)
- Pollution (especially oil spills)

DID YOU KNOW?

The 'Nereis' of the Fairy Tern's scientific name was a daughter of Nereus, the sea god of Greek Mythology and means 'sea nymph'.