

## LITTLE and FAIRY TERNS



• *Fairy Tern at nest with eggs.*

Photo: J. R. Napier



• *Little Tern alighting near nest.*

Photo: M. S. R. Sharland

## Little and Fairy Terns *Sterna* spp.

The Little Tern *Sterna albifrons* and Fairy Tern *S. nereis* are Australia's smallest terns. Both nest on shingle and sand beaches, especially on low-lying barren islets in bays and inlets, or on islands within the confines of the continental shelf. The breeding ranges of the two species do not appear to overlap: *albifrons* breeds from about Broome, east to Cape York, and down the east coast to Lakes Entrance, Victoria; *nereis* from the Dampier Archipelago, mid-Western Australia, south and east to Port Albert, Victoria, and Tasmania.

There is one specimen, and several sight records of *nereis* in February and March from Port Phillip Bay in Victoria (Hitchcock 1959). The only acceptable published sight record from N.S.W. was a sighting at Quibray Bay near

Sydney in December (Hoskin and Hindwood 1964).

[Since 1970, birds in plumage typical of *nereis* have been seen during winter and early spring, when *albifrons* is normally absent from the area (A. R. McGill, pers. comm.)—Hon. Editor.]

The two species differ in bill colour, the pattern of markings on head and the two outermost primaries, and possibly on mass. The sexes cannot be positively distinguished on external characters in either species.

### References

- Hitchcock, W. B. (1959), 'A Review of "Least" Terns in Australian Waters', *S. Aust. Orn.* 22: 87-106.  
Hoskin, E. S. and Hindwood, K. A. (1964), 'Fairy Tern near Sydney, N.S.W.', *Emu* 63: 335-336.

### LITTLE TERN

*Sterna albifrons*

*Length:* 203-254 mm

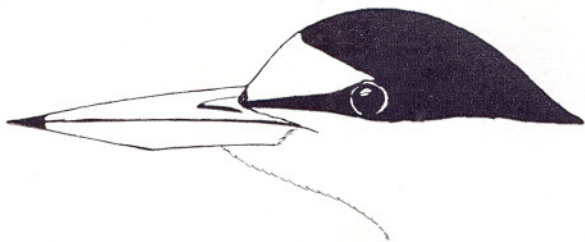
*Mass:* 48-60 g (mean 56.6 g for 13 specimens).

*Wing span:* 445-495 mm

#### Adult

*Breeding:* Bill olive-yellow or chrome-yellow, almost always tipped black (90% of 41 skins—Hitchcock 1959). Tarsus, toes and webs orange-yellow. Lores completely black. White on forehead extending over eyes in thin line. The inner webs of the outer two primaries with a well-defined strip of black next to the shaft, narrow at base but widening to cover whole tip.

*Winter:* Similar to breeding plumage, except that apical third or half of bill becomes black, the lores become white and the crown pale greyish-white.



LITTLE TERN—Adult Breeding

### FAIRY TERN

*Sterna nereis*

*Length:* 216-267 mm

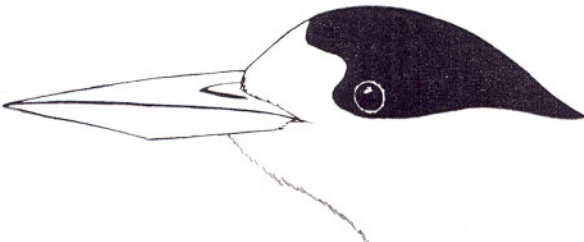
*Mass:* 65-85 g (mean 73.4 g for 11 specimens).

*Wing span:* 457-508 mm

#### Adult

*Breeding:* Bill orange or orange-yellow, sometimes tipped black (39% of 46 skins—Hitchcock 1959). Tarsus, toes and webs orange or orange-yellow. Lores white, black spot only in front of eye and no white line over eye. No black strip on primaries, only an ill-defined greyish line.

*Winter:* Similar to breeding plumage except that bill darkens, leaving only a yellowish centre, and crown becomes pale greyish-white.



FAIRY TERN—Adult Breeding

Drawings by Author