

Nesting habits of the Australian Fairy Tern

The Australian Fairy Tern is the smallest tern species to nest in south-western Australia. Fairy Terns are listed as Vulnerable under both state and federal legislation and are a protected species.

During spring, Fairy Terns migrate southward from the Gascoyne and Pilbara coasts to breed. They nest on open shorelines, sandy coastal lagoons and lakes, and in the lower reaches of estuaries where small baitfish and crustaceans are naturally abundant. Their beach-nesting lifestyle leaves Fairy Terns exposed to disturbance, often resulting in nest failure.

Adults incubate their eggs for about 3 weeks and during this time they are highly sensitive to disturbance. When approached by people or dogs, the birds will leave their nest by taking flight, exposing their eggs or small chicks to predators and harsh environmental conditions. If the birds are approached too frequently the birds abandon the nests to protect themselves.

Fairy Tern eggs are about the size of a 20-cent piece and are speckled, allowing them to camouflage well with their surroundings. When the chicks first hatch, they are very small, and their soft feathers are of mottled appearance which reduces their visibility to predators. However, this also means that eggs and chicks can easily be trampled or crushed.

As a beach-nesting species, Fairy Terns are also exposed to a range of natural threats such as storm events and high-tides that can cause their eggs to be washed away. In more recent times, predation from domestic and feral animals such as dogs and foxes has reduced population numbers and breeding success, and the locations where they used to breed have diminished due to land-clearing and human development.

To reduce these extra pressures, we are working together to provide a safe nesting habitat for Fairy Terns and other beach-nesting species. You can help protect beach-nesting birds like the Fairy Tern by keeping your distance from nesting birds and their chicks, and keeping your dog on a leash.

FIND US ON FACEBOOK:
Fairy Tern Conservation Group



Rous Head sanctuary

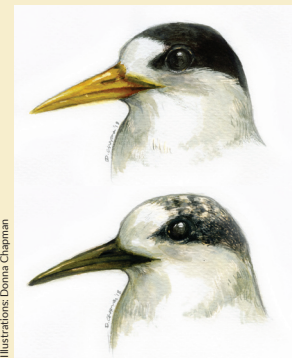
The Rous Head Fairy Tern sanctuary was constructed in 2013 on reclaimed land, designed specifically for Fairy Terns and their preferred habitat requirements. A layer of shell material was added to the ground surface to enhance the attractiveness of the site and the perimeter of the site is fully enclosed, providing protection to nesting terns and their young.

Since the sanctuary was constructed, the breeding population has increased from 90 pairs of birds in 2013/14 to 250 pairs in 2017/18, making it the most successful breeding location for Fairy Terns in the Perth metropolitan area. The success of the conservation area is due to its location and design, based on advice from Australian conservation authorities and the Western Australian Museum. The Conservation Council of WA and Murdoch University are involved in ongoing conservation research at the sanctuary which seeks to understand the life-history and population dynamics of the Australian Fairy Tern. Fremantle Ports has supported the creation of the Fairy Tern Network, including a Facebook page 'Fairy Tern Conservation Group' to encourage and coordinate community monitoring for the species.



Photo: Cheryllyn Corlier

Fairy Terns grow to about 70g and 25cm long. They feed on small bait fishes such as sardines, anchovies and sprat.



Illustrations: Donna Chapman

During the breeding period, adults have a black head cap, an orange beak and orange legs.

After breeding, the birds moult and their head cap fades to a mottled appearance and their beak is brownish.



Photo: Jason Abbao

Fairy Terns are surface feeders, which means that they collect their prey by plunge-diving. They hover above the water and then dive from several meters high to collect their fish at depths of up to 30 cm below the surface.

FAIRY TERN FACTS




Photo: Donna Chapman

The nest consists of a shallow scrape or depression in the sand. The adults will often add small shells, seaweed or pebbles to the nest to make the eggs less visible to predators.




Photo: Cheryllyn Corlier

The male feeds the female so that she can build up enough reserves to lay one to two eggs. Very occasionally three eggs can be laid when conditions are good.




Photo: Claire Greenwell

It takes three weeks for the chicks to hatch from their eggs and a further three weeks for them to grow large and strong enough to fly.




Photo: Cheryllyn Corlier

Juvenile Fairy Terns rely on their parents to help them catch fish for several months before they become fully independent.

