

Nesting

Tara iti nest between October and February, with some pairs making up to three attempts if nests fail. Each nest consists of a shallow scrape in the sand and will contain just one or two eggs. The eggs are well camouflaged among seashells.

Both parents take turns at incubating the eggs, which hatch after around 21 days. Chicks are fed small fish by both parents, and about three weeks after hatching, chicks will start experimenting with flight, but they will continue to depend on their parents for food until they learn to hover then dive for fish themselves.

Parents vigorously defend their nests and chicks against intruders, such as humans, other shorebirds or predators. They do this by calling, dive-bombing and defecating.



Tara iti chick and egg in nest scrape. Photo: Shannan Courtenay

Predators

Eggs, chicks and adults can be preyed upon by introduced mammalian predators, such as cats, rats, ferrets, stoats, weasels and hedgehogs. Native predators, such as the karoro/black-backed gull and kāhu/harrier hawk, can also prey upon eggs and chicks. With their only defence against predators being to freeze, chicks rely on their mottled grey and rust-brown feathers blending into the coastal habitat for camouflage. Unfortunately, cryptic colouration does not hide chicks from mammalian predators that use their keen sense of smell to hunt.



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You can help!

Please watch out for signposts that indicate areas where tara iti and other shorebirds nest.

- Keep dogs, vehicles and horses away.
- Do not enter fenced-off nesting areas.
- Do not light fires.
- Do not use drones over public conservation land.
- If fishing, remove bait or fish remains from the beach to deter the scavenging karoro.
- Take an active interest in the birds' welfare and encourage other people to care as well!



This information was accurate at the time of printing. For the latest information on Department of Conservation Te Papa Atawhai policies and facilities, visit www.doc.govt.nz.

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**Te Kāwanatanga
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Tara iti adult in flight foraging.
Photo: Nikki Hartley

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Report any safety hazards
or conservation emergencies
For Fire and Search and Rescue Call 111

Tara iti / New Zealand fairy tern





Tara iti adult and chick. Photo: Shelley Ogle

Characteristics

The tara iti / New Zealand fairy tern (*Sternula nereis davisae*) is one of Aotearoa New Zealand's rarest native birds, with a population of fewer than 40 individuals and 8-10 breeding females. This bird's rarity is due to a combination of factors, including habitat loss, predation and disturbances during the breeding season from October to February. The tara iti is also the smallest tern that breeds in New Zealand. The adult birds are at their most colourful during the breeding season, with black caps, bright yellow beaks, orange legs, soft grey wings and white underparts. After breeding, the cap fades to a mottled black and white, and the bill and legs lose their brightness. All the birds are banded, and individuals can be identified by the arrangement of their unique metal and coloured plastic leg bands.



Juvenile tara iti lifting off. Photo: Jacob Ball

Distribution

Once widespread along North Island coasts and the eastern parts of the South Island, tara iti breeding is now restricted to five coastal sites: Waipū, Mangawhai, Te Ārai, Pākiri and Papakānui Spit. Outside the breeding season, tara iti usually flock at sites in the Kaipara Harbour.



Recovery

The tara iti population plummeted to three pairs in 1984, at which time urgent steps were taken to protect the three remaining nesting areas. The population has increased slowly since then due to the introduction of rangers and volunteers who fence off nesting areas and trap predators.

Threats

Stormy weather can cause adult tara iti to abandon their nests, while high tides can wash the nests away. Nests can fail if parent birds are disturbed from incubating eggs or brooding chicks, and unattended eggs and chicks are vulnerable to chilling or overheating depending on the weather conditions. Recreational activities and pets can have devastating effects for nesting birds – dogs can chase or kill chicks, and vehicles and horses can crush eggs and chicks.



Fencing for tara iti nest protection. Photo: Nikki Hartley

Management

In recent years, management techniques have involved moving nests away from the high-tide line, transferring eggs and chicks between nests to maximise productivity and creating safer nest sites, artificial incubation, predator control, and advocacy.



Tara iti eggs in nest scrape. Photo: Nikki Hartley

