



# Bird Watch

June  
2013



White-fronted tern on the Boulder Bank  
Photo: Nancy Holden

## White-fronted Tern

*Sterna striata*

Maori name: Tara

With its forked tail and tendency to swoop and dive over water, it is easy to see why the white-fronted tern is also known as the sea swallow. 'White-fronted' does not refer to its breast, but to the fact that its black cap stops short of coming all the way down to the top of the bill, leaving a strip of white feathers between the cap and bill. Of the tern species found in New Zealand, the white-fronted tern is the most common and is widespread along coastlines.

They feed on small fish, such as smelt and pilchards, and shrimp. Frightened by kahawai, small fish often ascend to the water's surface, where they make easy pickings for tern and other sea birds. It's not easy being a small fish. Hovering, plunge diving and contact swooping are typical feeding behaviours of white-fronted terns.

They are long-lived birds, potentially living up to 26 years of age. White-fronted terns form pair bonds that may last many years. Breeding takes place between October and January in colonies situated near water along beaches, cliffs, shingle islands, etc. They often return to their place of birth to breed. Nests are placed on the ground, making them vulnerable to predation and other

disturbances. A clutch consists of 1-2 eggs. Parents feed the chicks for up to 3 months. Many juveniles and some adults overwinter in Australia, from South Queensland to South Australia and Tasmania. White-fronted tern exclusively bred in New Zealand until 1979, when nesting birds were discovered on islands in the Bass Strait between Tasmania and mainland Australia.

## Backyard Bird Monitoring Data

Recently Dave Butler produced this intriguing graph from our garden surveys. It shows the percentage of garden surveys in which bellbirds were recorded during each year from 2008 to March 2013. No trend is apparent from the garden surveys in which birds were fed (the blue bars). However, among the garden surveys in which birds were not fed (red bars), the percentage of surveys in which bellbirds were recorded trends upwards, which is an encouraging sign their numbers may be on the rise.



