

THE WHITE TERNS OF LORD HOWE ISLAND

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY RICHARD SLAUGHTER



The dinghy inched forward and hit the large red and white shipping buoy with a resounding thump. The pure white seabird sitting on the top raised its wings as if to depart, and then settled back again. We had been transfixed by the first recorded sighting in Bermuda of what we then knew as a Fairy Tern.

I recalled this scene when my wife and I arrived at Lord Howe Island in November 2008, more than thirty years later. As any visitor approaching the settlement during September to May cannot help but notice, there are significant numbers of White Terns (as they are now known) fluttering around the Norfolk Island Pines, soaring out over the lagoon in pairs or small groups, or sitting quietly on branches. During that visit and a subsequent one the following March we spent many hours in close company of these exquisite creatures.

White Terns are a "pantropical" species that nest on islands throughout the tropics. The subspecies found on Lord Howe, (*royana*) also occurs on Norfolk Island and the Kermadec Islands. The population of White Terns on Lord Howe is small but, from the limited records



Opposite page: A pair of White Terns soars majestically over Lord Howe Island.

Clockwise from top left: The White Terns' plumage makes them beautiful to look at, but easy targets for predators.

White Terns have taken advantage of the planting of Norfolk Island Pines on Lord Howe Island.

If they don't hang on tight, White Tern chicks are sometimes blown out of their trees by high winds.

available, growing steadily. Hutton notes that their presence on Lord Howe was first recorded in 1943. They were first known to be breeding in 1968. In 1991 some 60–100 pairs were estimated to be present and by 2006, 325 nests were counted by Carlisle during a currawong survey. The limits on their expansion appear related to available nesting sites and the occurrence of predation.

Their main predators are Masked Owls and the Lord Howe Pied Currawong. The former were imported into the island in the 1920s in a misguided attempt to control the rat population. The bright white plumage of the terns makes them easy targets day or night, as does their habit of laying their single egg out a bare, horizontal branch. Carlisle's research, however, suggests that their breeding rate compares well with other sites, concluding that the species is secure on Lord Howe and can withstand these predation pressures. Pairs that lose an early egg or chick will often produce a second later in the season.

Around the Lord Howe settlement area, it is not uncommon to find two or more birds exploring possible nesting sites. As they flutter and hover around these locations their calls rise and fall as if in mutual excitement. Many times we saw what appeared to be a female touch down on a branch, the male in close attendance. The female then performed a kind of "investigative dance" taking small steps around and along the branch. Anthropomorphism is difficult to avoid, she seemed to be thinking, "Does this spot suit me?", "How would this be for the next six weeks?"

The courtship flights over the lagoon are spectacular. Again, the female seems to lead with the male following. Mating takes place at, or close to, the nest site and seemed to us to be rather more tender than the perfunctory performances seen in other species. This impression was strengthened by the sight of the frequent mutual preening between mated couples and also between parents and their chicks.

Well known for laying only a single egg on a bare branch, the parent birds take turns to remain with the chick for another week or so after it hatches at 28 days. At this stage the fluffy chicks obviously need to grip the branch tightly with their sharp nails in order not to fall. Some, however, are blown off in high winds, perhaps to be rescued by locals. During our visits a cycle hire shop had acquired several orphans that were being fed by hand. We also saw a partly developed chick ascend the vertical trunk of a pine tree using its nails and wings. Unfortunately it was the wrong tree. The chick

was attacked by what looked like an over-protective parent—evidence perhaps, of territoriality.

Fledging takes about six weeks, during which time the chick is mostly alone. It is then that they are most vulnerable. The adult birds return with several small fish in their beaks—prompting the question of how they manage to hold on to the early catches while pursuing later ones. Unlike most other seabirds they feed the fish to the chicks whole, without predigesting them. For some of the smaller chicks this can be a challenge! Larger fish are sometimes seen being offered by one adult bird to another. When they are ready to leave the chicks depart with their parents to forage at sea.

While the Lord Howe population of White Terns is small in comparison with those found elsewhere, they do offer a close-up experience of wild beauty. White Terns in flight against a blue sky are strikingly beautiful. They have no fear of people and their approachability makes them popular with visitors. But what really struck us about the Lord Howe terns is that they appear to have chosen to colonise the island as a result of the Norfolk Island Pines that were planted some years ago, particularly around the settlement area. The pines were intended as windbreaks but for these birds they provide vital nesting sites. The fact that they cluster around the settlement area suggests that the presence of humans also affords them some measure of protection against predation.

As we left the island for the second time we reflected on how unusual this was. In so many other places human activities have degraded or destroyed the habitats of birds and other species. On Lord Howe our actions have allowed them to colonise and thrive. Assuming their predators can be managed, and as long as the islanders ensure that there are enough mature trees for these birds to utilise, the future seems bright for the White Terns of Lord Howe Island.

Further reading

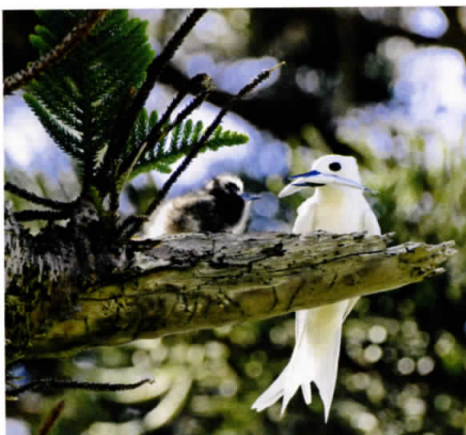
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Below: A White Tern chick chokes down an ambitious breakfast.



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On the cover: A White Tern flutters against a backdrop of overcast skies. Photo by Michael Snedic

Above: A eucalypt leaf with lerp. Lerp is one of the critical dietary items of the Endangered Forty-spotted Pardalote. Photo by Chris Tzaros