

ANNIVERSARY FACT SHEETS

THE CRESTED TERN

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF MONTAGUE ISLAND SHEARWATER RESEARCH 2009



The Crested Tern *Thalasseus bergii*

The Crested Tern is widespread around the coasts of the Indian Ocean, and western central Pacific Ocean. In Australia it is common in all coastal regions of the mainland and Tasmania. It is rarely found more than 150km from the coast. They are present on the NSW south coast throughout the year.

A rather large tern with a black cap, white forehead and distinctive yellow bill it is the most familiar tern on the south coast of NSW regularly seen feeding at sea or roosting on beaches, sand spits and rock walls etc. It is a day-time feeder most active on rising tides in the early morning and late afternoon. It sometimes feeds opportunistically following schools of small fish forced to the surface by dolphins or large gamefish. The Crested Tern feeds by plunging from a height of 7 – 10 metres, diving head or feet first into the sea to a depth of about half a metre. It feeds mainly on small fish but is also known to occasionally take prawns and squid. It is often seen 'skimming' the water with fish in its bill possibly cleaning it. It commonly steals food from other Crested Terns, usually at breeding colonies and has food taken from it by Gulls, Herons and other species of terns.

Crested Terns are highly vocal, especially during the breeding season. The most common call heard at sea or roosting sites away from the colony is a throaty 'krrroor'. On breeding colonies there are a variety of calls – alarm, between male and female during a changeover in incubation, locating chicks etc.

At the start of the breeding season large numbers of terns begin to roost some distance from the nesting place at a traditional pre-breeding site, a 'club', which becomes the centre of displays between prospective mates, courtship behaviour/feeding and copulation. This occurs on Montagu between July and August. Behaviour at the 'club' tends to synchronise breeding behaviour. The 'club' at Montagu Island has been the flat rocks on either side of the landing site for well over 100 years.

About 2 weeks before laying flocks of terns fly over and hover over the nesting site and usually fly off without landing. The pattern is repeated each day with more and more birds landing on the colony until all



settle and lay simultaneously (September on Montagu). Some new nests are added on the edges of the colony after the initial laying period, presumably by younger bird nesting for the first time.

On Montagu the nesting sites vary from year to year. In the early 1900s the terns nested on the north island but over the last 20 years they have been nesting close to the light station. The breeding colony on Montagu Island is between 700 – 1000 nests and appears to vary according to the fluctuating food resources surrounding the island. Nests in the colony are tightly packed; a small scrape about 30cm in diameter, usually unlined or sparsely lined with grass. The female lays one egg (2 egg clutches are known but very rare). The egg is 61 X 41mm and comprises about 15% of the female body weight.

After laying, both birds incubate the egg with shifts of between 45mins and 4 hours. The incubation period is between 21 and 24 days. On hatching the young are precocious and semi-nidifugous (covered in down feathers and active immediately after hatching). The chick is brooded and fed by both parents in the nest for about 3 days after which it is escorted by the parents some distance from the colony and brooded and protected by the parents until a crèche is formed with other chicks. The chicks are fed by the parents bill to bill and do not usually pick up fish dropped on the ground. Pioneering studies carried out on Montagu in the 1960s using sound spectrography showed that chicks utter unique calls that are immediately recognised by parents.



Chicks take between 38-40 days to fledge (the acquisition of its first true flight feathers). Parents feed chicks until well after they have fledged and young birds can be seen still begging for food as late as April. This long dependency may be necessary to give the young time to perfect their fishing techniques before becoming completely independent. After the breeding season most birds depart although a few remain near the island throughout the year.

During the incubation and chick rearing stages Crested Terns are easily disturbed and eggs and young birds are often taken by predators. On Montagu Island, Silver Gulls continually patrol the edges of colonies awaiting their opportunity snatch eggs and chicks from temporarily unattended nests. For this reason it is important not to approach Crested Tern colonies during these times.



Further Reading

Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds. Vol 3. Eds P.J. Higgins and S.S.J. Davies. (1996). Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

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