

### FAIRY TERN BREEDING RECORDS FROM SOUTH-EASTERN SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

The Fairy Tern *Sterna nereis* occurs along much of the South Australian coast, with breeding reported from Eyre Peninsula, Kangaroo Island, the South-East and elsewhere (Blakers *et al.* 1984). Published data on the size and frequency of use of breeding colonies in South Australia are lacking however — for example, Bransbury (1984) lists only one Fairy Tern breeding record, from Couwrie Island near Beachport.

Since 1973 I have visited the South-East of the State in most years at the height of the tern's breeding season (December–January), and on each occasion I surveyed the coast between Robe and Beachport looking for Fairy Tern colonies, the results being as follows.

#### Couwrie Island, ca 1.5 km west of Beachport

28 December 1973: About 30 pairs present, some with one egg, some with two eggs, and some with chicks. 28 December 1975: A single pair with a nest containing one egg. No other Fairy Terns were seen on the island during this visit. 30 December 1976: About 30 nests located, each with one or two eggs. The colony appeared deserted — only a few Fairy Terns were present, and most of the eggs were broken. The eggs may have been smashed by Silver Gulls *Larus novaehollandiae*, which were plentiful in the area, or by humans who could have reached the island at low tide. 28 December 1981: About 30 pairs present with nests containing one or two eggs, but no chicks seen.

I also went to Couwrie Island on 29 December 1974, 27 December 1978, 30 December 1982, 28 December 1986, 30 December 1987 and 29 December 1991, but no Fairy Terns were nesting there on any of these occasions.

#### Small unnamed islet ca 10 km south-east of Robe

27 December 1975: At least 50 pairs present, most with nests containing one or two eggs but also a few with chicks.

I visited the islet again on 30 December 1976, 24 December 1978, 31 December 1982, 27 December 1986, 29 December 1987 and 29 December 1991, but saw no Fairy Terns on any of these dates. Unlike Couwrie Island, which can only be reached on foot at low tide and even then only with some difficulty, the islet is usually easy to get to and I have seen people there on many occasions. Possibly, therefore,

Fairy Terns have not nested regularly at this site because of disturbance from the increasing number of people using the adjacent Little Dip Conservation Park.

#### Small unnamed islet ca 2 km north-west of Nora Creina Bay

30 December 1987: 10 to 20 pairs present and probably nesting. Although the islet was accessible I did not inspect it closely, since there were several groups of people on the beach nearby and I did not want to draw attention to the birds. No Fairy Terns were there when I visited the islet on 29 December 1991.

#### Headland ca 1.5 km north-west of Robe

26 December 1986: About 10 pairs present but only three nests found, two with one egg and one with two eggs. McCulloch (1987), visiting Robe from Victoria, discovered what was almost certainly some of the same group of terns a week or so earlier. When McCulloch arrived on 18 December she found four birds and a single nest containing one egg. When she left on 20 December there was still only one nest, but it had two eggs.

McCulloch was surprised to find a Fairy Tern breeding at a cliff-top site, which she stated was 20 m above sea level. However, although in places the headland does rise 20 m or so above the water, the actual site chosen by the terns is at most 10 to 15 m above sea level, not much higher than Couwrie Island and the islet near Nora Creina. The record therefore interests me more because it is the only one I have of Fairy Terns nesting on the mainland in the South-East. I was unable to return to Robe to determine whether or not the birds bred successfully, but given that the nests were situated in an area popular with tourists, and in view of the time of year, I doubt if any of the eggs hatched. I went to the area again on 29 December 1991, but no Fairy Terns were nesting there.

#### REFERENCES

- Blakers, M., Davies, S. J. J. F. & Reilly, P. N. 1984. *The Atlas of Australian Birds*. RAOU and Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.
- Bransbury, J. 1984. Bird Report, 1977–1981. *S. Aust. Orn.* 29: 121–168.
- McCulloch, E. M. 1987. Fairy Tern *Sterna nereis* nesting 20 m above sea level. *Aust. Bird Watcher* 12: 100–101.

*John Bransbury: 100 Fisher Street, Fullarton, South Australia 5063*

Received: 2 January 1992