

Help protect the Australian fairy tern at Point Walter

Fact Sheet

Australian fairy tern

The Australian fairy tern is the smallest tern species to nest in south-western Australia. Fairy terns are listed as Vulnerable under both state and federal legislation and are a protected species.

During spring, fairy terns migrate southward from the Gascoyne and Pilbara coasts to breed. They nest on open shorelines, sandy coastal lagoons and lakes, and in the lower reaches of estuaries where small baitfish and crustaceans are naturally abundant.

Point Walter is a highly important location for the terns. Unlike other known breeding sites, the Point Walter sandbar is also thought to provide a central meeting place where the terns travel to find their mates and build up their fat reserves before starting to lay their eggs.

Their beach-nesting lifestyle leaves fairy terns exposed to disturbance, often resulting in nest failure. During this time fairy terns are highly sensitive to disturbance. When approached by people or dogs, the birds will leave their nest by taking flight, exposing their eggs or small chicks to predators and harsh environmental conditions. If the birds are approached too frequently the birds can abandon their nests to protect themselves.



Photo credit:

Top right – Adult fairy tern on the beach, DBCA

Fairy tern eggs are about the size of a 20-cent piece and are speckled, allowing them to camouflage well with their surroundings. When the chicks first hatch, they are very small, and have mottled feathers that reduce their visibility to predators. However, this also means that eggs and chicks can easily be trampled or crushed.

Beach-nesting bird species are also exposed to a range of other threats. In recent times, predation from domestic and feral animals such as dogs and foxes has reduced fairy tern population numbers and breeding success. Australia-wide locations where they used to breed have diminished due to land-clearing and development.

To reduce these extra pressures, we are working together to provide a safe nesting habitat for fairy terns and other beach-nesting species. **You can help protect the fairy tern by keeping your distance and staying behind the temporary fence at the end of the Point Walter sand spit**

How you can help

- Avoid scaring the birds to flight when walking, fishing, kitesurfing or during any other activity;
- Please don't set up your kite or paddle board near the end of the sand spit;
- Stand up paddle boarders should avoid paddling directly towards the sand spit (fenced off area);
- Please don't carry or launch watercraft through vegetated or fenced off areas of the foreshore;
- Avoid walking in or near the fenced off area;
- If you spot a nest or see birds performing the broken wing display, give them a wide berth;
- Report bird nest sightings to DBCA on 9442 0300 or the City of Melville on (08) 9364 0666;
- Report sick, injured or orphaned native birds to the WILDCARE helpline on (08) 9474 9055

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1) Why is the end of the sand spit fenced off?

The fence has been installed by the City of Melville and the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions in order to increase the chance of nesting success of the Australian fairy tern, a vulnerable species that makes use of the area. The fence is aimed at reducing disturbance to the Fairy Terns while they are nesting.

2) Why are fairy terns important?

The Australian fairy tern is the smallest tern species to nest in south-western Australia. Fairy terns are listed as Vulnerable under both state and federal legislation and are a protected species. It is estimated that there are less than 3000 breeding pairs of fairy terns in Western Australia.

3) What is so special about Point Walter for these birds?

Point Walter is a highly important location for the terns. It is estimated that approximately 70 nesting pairs will use the end of the spit to raise their chicks this year. Unlike other known breeding sites, the Point Walter sandbar is also thought to provide a central meeting place where the terns travel to find their mates and build up their fat reserves before starting to lay their eggs.

4) What makes this species vulnerable?

Beach-nesting bird species are exposed to a range of threats including trampling, predation from domestic and feral animals such as dogs and foxes, land-clearing and development.

5) How long will the fence be there?

The fence will be installed between October and February.

Photo credit:

Top right – Juvenile fairy tern on the beach, Claire Greenwell, Murdoch University

Middle right – Fairy tern chick and egg, Christine Taylor, DBCA

Bottom right – Fairy tern eggs, Claire Greenwell, Murdoch University

6) What else is being done?

Chick shelters have been installed to reduce chick exposure and predation risk.

7) Can I fish in the water?

We prefer that people do not enter the area beyond the fence. But if you must fish, please move through the water leaving a 20m buffer to the shoreline.

8) Can I take my dog on the spit?

Dogs are not permitted in this area of Point Walter.

