



## Table 1: Fairy Prion

### Fairy prion | Tītī wainui

*Pachyptila turtur* (Kuhl, 1820)

**Order:** Procellariiformes

**Family:** Procellariidae

**New Zealand status:** Native

**Conservation status:** Relict

**Other names:** titi wainui, dove petrel

**Geographical variation:** No subspecies currently recognised. Southernmost populations previously referred to subspecies *subantarctica*.



Fairy prion | Tītī wainui. In flight, dorsal. Whangaroa pelagic, July

**Species Information****Breeding and ecology**

The fairy prion is an abundant and familiar petrel of exposed coastal waters around New Zealand, especially from Cook Strait southwards. It often feeds in large flocks over tide rips near offshore rocks and islands. Slightly smaller than a red-billed gull, fairy prions are very similar in appearance to the five other prion species: blue-grey and black above, and white below, with blue bill and legs. This colouration and their habit of flying along wave troughs make prions difficult to follow with binoculars from a moving boat deck. The Poor Knights Islands are the only northern breeding site, but fairy prions breed in burrows and rock crevices on many islands from Cook Strait south, including on the Chatham Islands and several subantarctic island groups. The largest colony holds an estimated 1.8 million pairs. Fairy prions, along with other prion species, are often found storm-wrecked on beaches exposed to the open ocean, especially on the west coast of both main islands.

**Identification**

All six prion species are very similar in appearance and behaviour, differing mainly in bill shape. All are medium-small seabirds that are blue-grey above and white below, with a blackish 'M' across the back from wingtip to wingtip, a black tip to the upper tail, and blue bill, legs and feet. The fairy prion is the smallest prion species, and is most similar to the much rarer fulmar prion. Both these species have relatively chunky bills lacking comb-like lamellae along the margins of the upper mandible, and have a broader black tip to the upper tail compared to other prions. They also have more ill-defined facial markings than the other prion species.

Voice: fairy prions rarely call at sea, but they are vocal on the ground at night at their breeding colonies, giving harsh chattering calls and softer crooning.

Similar species: the bill of the fulmar prion, and particularly the nail of the upper mandible, is more massive than in the fairy prion, and the fulmar prion has a smaller gap between the nostril tube and the terminal nail.

**Distribution and habitat**

Fairy prions breed on the Poor Knights Islands, islands in the outer Marlborough Sounds (especially Stephens Island, Trio Islands and The Brothers), rock stacks and islets off the West Coast (including the Open Bay Islands), Motunau Island, rock stacks off Banks Peninsula, cliffs along the edges on Otago Peninsula and nearby Green Island, many islands in Foveaux Strait and around Stewart Island, Mangere Island and at least six smaller islands in the Chatham Islands, the Snares Islands, Antipodes Island and Macquarie Island. They may also breed on islets off Campbell Island. Elsewhere, fairy prions breed on islands off Victoria and Tasmania, Australia, and on islands in the Kerguelen, Crozet, St Paul, Prince Edward, Marion, South Georgia and Falkland archipelagos. Vagrants have been found at the Kermadec Islands, Papua New Guinea, South America and South Africa. They are most often seen over the open sea near breeding colonies, and rarely enter sheltered coastal waters.

**Population**

There may be as many as 4 million pairs of fairy prions in the New Zealand region. The largest population is on Stephens Island, with 1.83 million pairs estimated. Other large colonies include Mangere Island (c.40,000 pairs), and 1.5 million pairs were estimated on Green Island, Foveaux Strait in 1941, but few were evident there in 2012. Fairy prions are the most common bird found dead on New Zealand beaches, at an average rate of 0.56 birds per km.

**Threats and conservation**

Fairy prions are likely to have bred on many coastal headlands before human arrival in New Zealand. Apart from on a few inaccessible cliffs along the edges on Otago Peninsula, fairy prions have since been extirpated from the mainland by introduced predators. Their main natural predators at their island breeding sites are subantarctic skuas and swamp harriers. Introductions of feral cats, weka or rats decimated or extirpated fairy prion populations on many muttonbird islands around Stewart Island.

Few actions specifically targeted at conservation of fairy prions have been undertaken. These included translocation of 240 near fully-grown chicks from Stephens Island to Mana Island during 2002-04 in an attempt to establish a new population, and installation of nest boxes at a cliff-edge colony on Otago Peninsula. Other more generic island restoration projects (especially pest mammal and weka

eradication) have and will benefit fairy prion populations, including on Stephens Island, Mangere Island and on several muttonbird islands near Stewart Island.

## Breeding

Fairy prions are colonial breeders, nesting in short burrows or rock crevices, mainly on small islands. The breeding season is earlier in the north, with peak laying of the single egg in mid-October at the Poor Knights, and early November on the Snares Islands. Incubation is shared and takes 44-54 days. The chick is left unattended during daylight when only 1-5 days old. One or both parents visit most nights and feed the chick by regurgitation right through to fledging at 43-56 days old. Young birds return to colonies when 2-3 years old, and first breed when 3-4 years old.

## Behaviour and ecology

Fairy prions often occur in large flocks at sea. They are not attracted to boats. Food items are mainly captured by shallow dives or surface-seizing while hydroplaning – facing into the wind with wings extended, and dipping the head and neck into the upper 10 cm of the water column. They are largely non-migratory, staying in New Zealand waters throughout the year. Birds can be found ashore at colonies in any month of the year, though few are present for 1-2 months after breeding (c. March in Cook Strait, April on Snares Islands).

Fairy prions excavate their own burrows, or utilise caves and rock crevices. They breed as monogamous pairs, which typically remain together over many seasons. Fairy prions visit breeding sites after dark and depart before dawn, or stay in burrows or nest crevices during daylight.

## Food

Fairy prions mainly eat small pelagic crustaceans, along with small fish and squid. The small krill species *Nyctiphanes australis* is by far the predominant species eaten in New Zealand, followed by pelagic amphipods and copepods.

## Websites

BirdLife factsheet

Wikipedia

<http://www.nzbirds.com/birds/prionfairy.html>

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#### Recommended citation

Miskelly, C.M. 2013 [updated 2022]. Fairy prion | titi wainui. In Miskelly, C.M. (ed.) *New Zealand Birds Online*. [www.nzbirdsonline.org.nz](http://www.nzbirdsonline.org.nz)  
Fairy prion | Titi wainui

## Fairy prion | Titi wainui

### Social structure

monogamous

### Breeding season

Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun

### Nest type

burrow, rock crevice

### Nest height (mean)

0 m

### Maximum number of successful broods

1

### Clutch size (mean)

1

### Mean egg dimensions (length)

44 mm

### Mean egg dimensions (width)

32 mm

### Egg colour

White

### Egg laying dates

Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun

### Interval between eggs in a clutch

Not applicable days

### Incubation behaviour

shared

### Incubation length (mean)

44-54 days

### Incubation length (min)

44 days

**Incubation length (max)**

54 days

**Nestling type**

semi-precocial

**Nestling period (mean)**

43-56

**Nestling period (min)**

43 days

**Nestling period (max)**

56 days

**Age at fledging (mean)**

43-56 days

**Age at fledging (min)**

43 days

**Age at fledging (max)**

56 days

**Age at independence (mean)**

43-56 days

**Age at independence (min)**

43 days

**Age at independence (max)**

56 days

**Age at first breeding (typical)**

3 years

**Maximum longevity**

22 plus years

**Maximum dispersal**

200 km

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**Identification****Length: 25 cm****Weight: 120 g**

Similar species: Fulmar prion

A small prion, blue-grey above and white below, with a blackish 'M' across the back from wingtip to wingtip, a black tip to the upper tail, and blue bill, legs and feet. In the hand, it has a relatively chunky bill lacking comb-like lamellae along the margins of the upper mandible, and a broader black tip to the upper tail and more ill-defined facial markings than the other prion species.

**Sounds**

Pair in nest hole

Burrow calls

Calls from pair in burrow  
Ground calls at breeding site

## Images



## Book extracts



Checklist of the birds  
of NZ  
OSNZ

