

WHITE TERN INFORMATION SHEET

Written by Dr. Eric VanderWerf, Pacific Rim Conservation, February 2016

The White Tern or Manu O Ku (*Gygis alba*) is a seabird that nests in Honolulu. It is a special bird for many reasons:

- It is one of few native Hawaiian birds that has adapted to human development and can be seen easily in urban Honolulu.
- It was designated the official bird of the City and County of Honolulu by the Mayor in 2007.
- They are common in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, but in the inhabited main Hawaiian Islands they nest only in urban areas of Honolulu.
- When not nesting, they may travel for weeks over thousands of miles of open ocean.
- They are used by traditional Hawaiian navigators as indicators of land.

Identification. White Terns are all white, with long narrow wings, big black eyes, and a long, pointed, black beak (left 2 photos). They have a graceful flight pattern and often fly in groups of 2-3 birds. Pigeons can be all white, but they have a shorter pink beak, smaller eyes, pink feet, shorter wings, and a more direct flight pattern (right photo).



Droppings. Trees used frequently by White Terns often can be recognized by the accumulation of white droppings underneath. The droppings are pure white. Some trees may be used by adult terns only for roosting, and not for nesting.



“Nests”. White Terns do not make an actual nest but instead lay their single egg directly on a bare branch.



Incubating Adults. When White Terns are incubating an egg, the egg often is not visible because it is covered up by the feathers, but usually a bulge is visible in the bird's chest feathers. Eggs hatch after 35 days.



Small Chicks. Small chicks (< 2 weeks old) are often brooded by one parent, but may be alone, when they are hard to see. They can be white, gray, or mixed colors.



Large Chicks. Larger chicks may be left alone for several hours during the day, but the adults return to feed the chick every day and usually spend the night with it. Larger chicks may walk around on the branch and may not always be in the same spot.



Juveniles. Chicks begin to fly about 50 days after hatching. Young birds that are able to fly are called juveniles and may continue to return to the nest tree for several weeks. Juveniles can be recognized by the light brownish markings on the feathers on their wings and back.



Threats. Although White Terns are common in Honolulu, they face several threats, including cutting or trimming of trees in which they nest, predation by non-native animals including feral cats, rats, and mongooses, and storms that can blow eggs or chicks out of the tree.