

A White Tern (*Gygis alba*) in the Bahamas

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On 17 June 2010 in the early evening, Cummins and Boardman observed a White Tern (*Gygis alba*) as it flew back and forth over the field station catchment basin at Gerace Research Centre, San Salvador, Bahamas. The bird was present for five minutes and observed only in flight. They were aware of the rarity of the observation and documented the bird carefully with field notes and photographs (Figures 1-3; Cummins et al. 2013).

White Terns of the nominate subspecies nest in the South Atlantic on the islands of Fernando de Noronha, Trindade, Martim Vaz, Ascension, and St. Helena. Relatively recent estimates of populations include “fewer than 1000 adults” in the Fernando

de Noronha Archipelago (Antas 1991), up to 800 at Ilha da Trindade (Fonseca-Neto 2004), 5300 breeding adults at Ascension (most on Boatswainbird Islet; Ashmole et al. 1990), and several hundred on St. Helena (Rowlands et al. 1998). Leandro Bugoni of the Instituto de Ciências Biológicas, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande, who has conducted research at Ilha da Trindade since 1996, indicates (in litt.) that his observations suggest a population of perhaps 400 White Terns there. Bugoni has also documented very small numbers breeding at nearby Martim Vaz in April 2007 and reports that recent surveys of other Brazilian oceanic islands (Atol das Rocas, Abrolhos, São Pedro, and São Paulo) have not produced evidence of

nesting White Terns.

White Terns nest at far more stations in the Pacific and Indian Ocean basins than in the Atlantic and are far more numerous in the former basins; nevertheless, there is no verified record of the species for the Pacific side of North America. A 1983 sight record by Neal G. Smith of two White Terns at sea 11 kilometers south of Pacora, Panama (Ridgely and Gwynne 1989) is considered tentative.

In the North Atlantic, north of the equator, there are just two previous records of White Tern. In the southern Caribbean, an individual of this species was recorded at Store Bay, Tobago 16 August 1987 (French 1991). The only other record is from Great

Figures 1-3. White Tern, Gerace Research Centre, San Salvador, Bahamas 17 June 2010. The identification of this species is straightforward from these photographs; no other seabird shows this snow-white plumage, large dark eyes, and long, pointed bill. Certain identification to subspecies is likely not possible without a specimen, but these images show only a faint trace of darker pigment in the shaft (rhacis) of the outermost primary (birds of the Pacific *candida* subspecies group show much more), a relatively shallow fork in the tail compared to Pacific subspecies (though the apparent depth of fork changes with tail posture and with photographic angle), and only a small amount of bluish tone in the base of the bill—all aspects that point to the nominate subspecies, *Gygis alba alba*. The shape of the bill and possibly the shape of the feathering around the base of the bill also appear to support that identification. Photographs by R. Hays Cummins.



Sound, Bermuda, a single bird observed 7-9 December 1972 (Wingate and Watson 1974). From photographs, this bird was determined to be of one of the Pacific/Indian Ocean subspecies (*pacifica*, *monte*, or *candida*; D. B. Wingate, in litt.), which are sometimes together called the *candida* subspecies group. The subspecies of the San Salvador bird cannot be determined with certainty from the photographs, but the limited dark pigmentation in the shaft of the outermost primary, the rather shallowly forked tail, the long, slender, stiletto-like bill, and the limited amount of bluish color in the base of the bill together point to the nominate subspecies. From the photographs, it is not possible to make out precisely the pattern of feathering at the base of the bill, sometimes used to assess subspecies (see Wingate and Watson 1974).

Although the San Salvador White Tern was about 5500 kilometers from the nearest breeding area in the South Atlantic (and 4000 kilometers from breeding areas on Clipperton Island, in the Pacific), birders in the Caribbean should be vigilant for further

records of this species. And as the San Salvador bird was only 600 km from Florida, birders in the United States should be watchful for records on the North American mainland as well.

Acknowledgments

We thank Leandro Bugoni and George Angehr for information on the status of White Tern in Brazil and Panama, respectively, and Stephen J. Dinsmore for helpful editorial comments on an earlier draft of this note.

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