



THE WHITE TERN OR MANU O KŪ



Honolulu's Special Bird

IDENTIFICATION:



White Terns are all white with big black eyes and a long, pointed, black beak. Pigeons (above right) can be all white, but they have a shorter pink beak, smaller eyes, and pink feet.

BACKGROUND:

The White Tern or Manu O Ku (*Gygis alba*) is a seabird that nests on many islands in the tropical and subtropical Pacific, Atlantic, and Indian oceans. They are common in the northwestern Hawaiian Islands, but in the main Hawaiian Islands they occur only on Oahu, and only in Honolulu. The Oahu population is listed as threatened by the State of Hawaii. In 2016, the Hawaii Division of Forestry and Wildlife asked Pacific Rim Conservation to survey White Terns in Honolulu in order to measure the population size and range, and to provide information that can be used to help avoid impacts from tree trimming.

POPULATION SIZE AND TREND



The first pair of White Terns was found breeding on Oahu in 1961. We censused the population in 2002, when there were about 700 birds including 250 breeding pairs. We repeated the census in 2016 in collaboration with the Hui Manu O Ku, and the numbers had grown to 2,300 birds including 700 breeding pairs!

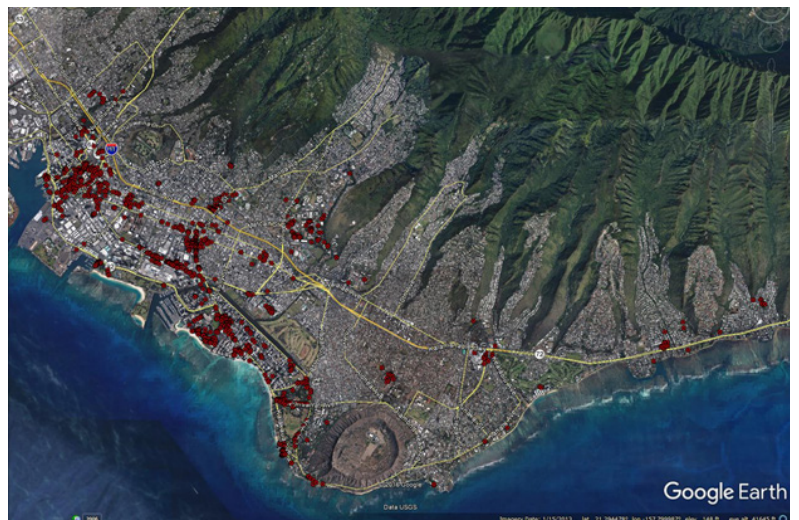
THREATS

The fact that the number of White Terns on Oahu has continued to grow indicates they do not have any serious threats right now, but they are affected to some degree by:

- predation from non-native animals including feral cats, rats, and barn owls;
- careless tree trimming that results in loss of eggs and chicks;
- strong winds that can blow eggs and chicks out of trees.

RANGE

On Oahu, White Terns breed only in urban and suburban areas of Honolulu, though they are occasionally seen in other areas. They breed from Niu Valley in the east to Aloha Tower and Nuuanu Valley in the west, with a few birds at Hickam Air Force Base. The largest concentrations are at Kalakaua Avenue, Kapiolani Boulevard, Kapiolani Park, Waikiki, downtown including Iolani Palace and the State Capitol, the University of Hawaii at Manoa, and the Punahou area.



Red dots are trees used by White Terns.

BREEDING:



White Tern egg (left), Incubating adult (right).

White Terns do not make a nest but instead lay their single egg directly on a tree branch or other flat surface. The egg is white with brown spots and is often laid in a circular branch scar or balanced against a flake of bark. The male and female takes turns incubating the egg, which hatches after 35 days. Chicks can begin flying about 45 days after hatching but typically return to the same tree to be fed for several more weeks. White Terns nest year round and some pairs raise two or even three chicks in one year.



When White Terns are incubating, the egg often is not visible because it is covered up by the bird, but a bulge can be seen in the breast feathers of the parent. Small Chicks (< 2 weeks old) often are brooded by one parent, but sometimes they are left alone, when they are hard to see. They can be white, gray, tan, or mixed. Large chicks may walk around in the tree before they can fly. Both parents return to feed the chick every day and usually spend the night.



JuveQ Nile White

Juveniles (young birds that can fly) may continue to return to the nest tree for several weeks and can be recognized by light brownish feathers on their wings and back.

White Terns prefer large trees for nesting. Tree species used most often are monkeypod, shower, kukui, banyan, and mahogany. Trees used frequently by White Terns can be recognized by the accumulation of pure white droppings under them. On other islands White Terns lay eggs on man-made structures, but on Oahu this is rare.



White Tern with egg on a railing (left), White Tern droppings (right)

WHAT TO DO IF YOU FIND A TERN CHICK ON THE GROUND:

Try to figure out where it came from. Are there droppings nearby, or adult terns that could be the parents? If you know which tree and which branch it was on, try to put it back. If you can't reach the branch and there is a lower branch you can reach safely, put it there. Watch to see if the parents find the chick and feed it. If you don't know where it came from, or you cannot reach the branch, or the parents do not return after several hours, contact one of the people or agencies listed below for help.

HOW CAN I HELP?

Support efforts to reduce numbers of feral cats in Honolulu.

Prevent unsanitary conditions that attract and support rats.

Look carefully for tern eggs or chicks before trimming or cutting trees.

Preserve large trees of species that White Terns prefer.

Become a citizen scientist and work with the Hui Manu O Ku to search for and monitor tern nests, go to: www.whiteterns.org.

5 amazing things about the White Tern

- ✓ It was designated the official bird of the City and County of Honolulu in 2007.
- ✓ Navigators of traditional Hawaiian voyaging canoes use White Terns as indicators of land.
- ✓ They can catch several fish in their beak at once, without dropping any!
- ✓ When breeding, they return to feed their chick every day. When not breeding, they may travel for weeks over thousands of miles of ocean.
- ✓ The oldest known White Tern on Oahu is 34 years old!

CONTACT INFORMATION

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