

Although the ethology of several species of terns is well known, the basic studies of Sooty Tern behavior were made over 50 years ago (Watson, 1908; Watson and Lashley, 1915; Lashley, 1915). Most terns that have been studied feed in coastal waters or fresh water, but the Sooties are pelagic. From 1968 to 1971 I studied the behavior of Sooty Terns at the Dry Tortugas. Besides describing their behavior, I have attempted to compare their behavior with that of coastal feeding terns and then to relate the Sooties' behavior to their pelagic habits.

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#### THE DRY TORTUGAS

I studied Sooty Terns at Bush Key, one of seven islands in the Dry Tortugas group at approximately 24° 38' N, 82° 52' W, about 70 miles west of Key West, Florida. The islands are located on a large shallow bank, much of it less than five fathoms deep, in the southeastern Gulf of Mexico (Figure 1). Sooty Terns have nested at the Tortugas since at least 1832 (Audubon, 1844). In recent years some 80,000 Sooties have bred mainly on Bush Key, a low sand island some 20 acres in area. Nesting terns of the Tortugas have had some protection since 1903, and since 1935 Bush Key has been part of Fort Jefferson National Monument. The history of the tern colonies at the Tortugas has been reviewed in detail (Robertson, 1964) and will not be covered further here.

Three small brackish ponds in the center of Bush Key are rimmed by mangroves (*Rhizophora mangle* and *Laguncularia racemosa*) and buttonwood (*Conocarpus erectus*). Around them a thicket of bay cedar (*Suriana maritima*) 6 to 8 feet tall covers much of the island. Outside the bay cedar