

lay the single egg that they incubate 29 to 30 days. The chicks are closely attended for the first week or two and then are alone much of the time except when fed. Chicks first fly when about 8 weeks old and apparently leave Bush Key soon afterward. Some juveniles are flying by late June, and most terns have left the Tortugas by late August or early September.

Little is known of the activities of Sooty Terns away from the colony. Out of some 153,700 chicks banded on Bush Key, about 80 have been recovered away from the colony. After leaving Bush Key juveniles apparently drift west in the Gulf of Mexico and then south along the eastern coast of Central America, finally moving east along northern South America and out across the Atlantic. They spend 2 to 4 years in the Gulf of Guinea off West Africa, and gradually drift back across the Atlantic (Robertson, 1969). A few 3-year-old birds appear at the Tortugas late in the breeding season, but almost certainly do not breed. At least a few 6-year-old birds breed, but some Sooties may not breed until older (B. Harrington, pers. comm.).

Among those banded as adults the recovery rate is lower, with only about 25 recoveries away from the colony out of 81,100 banded through 1970. These recoveries suggest that most adults range over but remain essentially within the Gulf of Mexico throughout the year (Robertson, 1969).

FORMATION OF THE COLONY

As the terns assemble and reform the colony, they are very skittish and difficult to follow. Their activities can be divided into periods of aerial flocking and first landing.

AERIAL FLOCKING

Robertson (1964) describes a period of night flocking, starting some 2-3 months before eggs are laid. The terns approach Bush Key from the northwest and gather near or over the breeding grounds to call, circle, and land, only to leave around dawn. Ashmole (1963) describes "night clubs" of terns that land on the breeding grounds in groups at night and leave before daylight. Tracks in the sand on Bush Key show that night groups form there too, although I never saw them.

When I arrived at the Dry Tortugas on 29 March 1968, Sooty Terns had not yet laid any eggs, but they were flocking in well-developed patterns every evening. Every morning by about 08:00 (all times are EST) most Sooties had left the island. Occasionally during the day flocks of up to 10 Sooty Terns circled rapidly over Bush Key, giving loud "wide-a-wake" calls or sharp "yip yip" notes as one bird chased another. The birds passed over the island once or sometimes repeatedly, flying low and often in pairs. They flew slowly with deep wing beats. Their flight resembled the low (fish) flight display described for other terns (Palmer, 1941; Cullen, 1960a), except that they did not carry a fish in their bill.