

WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

A Hurricane Bird

After keeping records of all the birds (and other wildlife) that I've seen in Victoria Park since moving here 7 years ago, I pretty much know what lives in our woods and ponds, and even what to expect to see flying overhead. But when my neighbors, Ceil and Bernie Scheibis, called me the day after Hurricane Irma to say they rescued a bird that appeared weak and unable to fly in their backyard, I was in for a big surprise when I arrived at their house. There, in a pet carrier, was a Sooty Tern — a bird that lives in tropical oceans and comes to land on offshore islands only during the summer nesting season. In Florida, the only place Sooty Terns can be found is way out on the Dry Tortugas west of Key West!

Slightly smaller than a crow, the Sooty Tern is 16 inches long and has a wingspread of 32 inches. It is a handsome bird, black above and white below, with a white forehead, long black bill, deeply forked tail, and tiny black feet (indicative of the fact that it hardly ever walks). Terns are closely related to gulls but are much more graceful in flight and usually catch fish by hovering over and then diving head-first straight into the ocean. The Sooty Tern, however, doesn't dive — it swoops down and plucks small fish and squid from the surface of the water. This bird usually flies far offshore and hardly ever lands even on the water — it even sleeps on the wing!

Sooty Terns are notorious wanderers, ranging all over tropical oceans when not nesting. But they also have a remarkable homing ability. Biologists have banded them and released them as far away as Texas and North Carolina, and in less than a week the

birds found they way back to the Dry Tortugas!

So what was a Sooty Tern doing in Victoria Gardens? You probably already guessed the answer — Hurricane Irma. In every bird book I own, the same fact is related : “often blown inland as much as hundreds of miles by hurricanes”. After taking a few photos I watched the Sooty Tern fly straight up about 200 feet into the air and then out of sight.