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Local Environmentalist Spots Rare Bird In St. Croix Skies

Jennifer Valiulis, executive director of the St. Croix Environmental Assoc., captures the unusual sighting of a white tern—a species typically found in the Pacific Ocean—marking only the second recorded instance in the West Indies

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White Tern spotted on St. Croix. By. JENNIFER VALIULIS

Birdwatchers and Ornithologists in the territory were excited yesterday after a rare White Tern was recently spotted in the skies over St. Croix.

Jennifer Valiulis, executive director of the St. Croix Environmental Association, was on routine sea turtle track patrol on August 11, walking along St. Croix's southwest shore at Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge, when she had an unusual encounter.?

A white bird was hovering above her dog, and its graceful, floating behavior caught the attention of Ms. Valiulis, who had never seen anything like it before. "I first assumed it was a Least Tern," Jennifer recalls. "But as I looked closer, I realized the markings weren't right." This bird was larger than the Least Tern, and was completely white, missing the grey markings on the back of its smaller cousin.

Ms. Valiulis had the presence of mind to take several photos of the visitor, and after her walk tried to verify the bird's identity. She ultimately shared the images she had captured with a local birding group chat. Ornithologists in the group concluded after further research that the bird was indeed a White Tern, which is usually found in the Pacific Ocean, near Hawaii. It has also been spotted in the southern Atlantic region, but much less commonly.?

This is only the second time a White Tern has been spotted in the entire West Indies – the first was sighted in 2010 in the Bahamas. Displaced birds, as this one may have been, depend on wildlife refuges for sanctuary, Ms. Valiulis says. "It's a safe place for them to rest and refuel so they can hopefully find their way back to where they would normally be found. While we haven't seen anything quite so unusual at Sandy Point before, it's not uncommon to spot tired, hungry birds that have strayed from their migratory routes," she explained.

Speaking to regional bird conservation organization BirdsCaribbean, seabird expert Rhiannon Austin says the rare visitor may have been blown off course during a storm or strong winds. In the world of ornithology, this is called "vagrancy", which results in birds ending up far from their natural habitat. Changes in weather patterns could also force seabirds to wander far from home in search of food or due to disrupted migratory routes. "This sighting is exciting but also a poignant reminder of the broader environmental shifts impacting wildlife globally," Ms. Austin remarked.

According to Ms. Valiulis, her experience underscores the importance of documenting unusual sightings. "Even if it isn't something very rare, the observation is still valuable," she advises. She also stresses the importance of taking time to observe nature, rather than just collecting data. "Sometimes those anomalies turn out to be something really unusual and exciting—like a White Tern on St. Croix!"

As the bird has not been seen on St. Croix since Ms. Valiulis spotted it last week, experts believe that Ernesto may have carried it off to another island, and encourage West Indian birders to keep their eyes peeled for an unusually large all-white tern with a pointed black beak.