

The Tale of the Tern

Narrative by George Wheaton, with photos by Ann Van Sant

On Saturday September 15, 2018 Hurricane Florence churned her way through North Carolina bringing strong winds, heavy rain, and torrential flooding to much of the state. It also swept up birds that normally inhabit the coast or open ocean and deposited them well inland, in places they would never choose to visit on their own. One of these storm-driven waifs was a juvenile Sooty Tern, which in its exhausted condition finally landed on the parking lot at Lowe's in High Point. This began an unlikely chain of events that is still being played out.

The bird, now known as "Florence" or "Flo", was spotted by a good Samaritan who picked it up and delivered it to the Happy Tails Emergency Clinic in Greensboro. On Sunday, Flo was delivered into the care of Piedmont Wildlife Rehab, Inc. where she received round-the-clock feeding and care from Melissa Coe and a staff of volunteers. Having come to Melissa in a "dehydrated and malnourished state" and in critical condition, she slowly responded to rest, food, and drink and began to recover from her ordeal. She remained with Melissa and the other rehabbers until Sunday morning on the 23rd. By this time she appeared alert, was eating on her own, occasionally preened, and seemed generally improved. At this point the question became what to do next.

The Sooty Tern is a species that spends its entire life far offshore in the deep and blue waters of the ocean. It is a denizen of warm waters associated with the Gulf Stream. Sooty Tern is a true pelagic species. It only comes ashore to mate and raise a family in a colony of like-minded birds. In juvenile Flo's case this would not happen for another three to five years and would most likely occur in Florida's Dry Tortugas islands where North America's largest Sooty Tern colony is located. Given these considerations it became clear that Flo should be returned to the ocean, as far offshore as it was possible to take her.

The proposal was made to drive her to Hatteras, NC and get her on a boat that would be venturing out to the Gulf Stream. Three members of the Piedmont Bird Club - Roberta Newton, Ann Van Sant, and George Wheaton - volunteered to drive Flo to Hatteras. Logistical details included how to continue feeding Flo during transit, finding a safe driving route, and arranging for a boat out of Hatteras. Ironically, Brian Patteson's *Stormy-Petrel* was taking birders offshore on Saturday but Flo was not ready to travel at that time. The PBC team met Melissa and Flo on Sunday morning, made the transfer, and began the drive to Hatteras. Because the *Stormy-Petrel* was not going to sea on Sunday, a fallback plan

was put into motion. Flo would be delivered to another rehabber – Lou Browning – who has his clinic in Frisco near Hatteras and who is an expert in bird rehabilitation.



Pictures above: Hand off of Flo for drive to the coast. Flo in her carrier riding high on her blue pillow.

After a six-hour drive the team and Flo arrived in Frisco where they met Lou. After some discussion the decision was made to attempt release of Flo at a quiet spot next to the bay where there was plenty of food and calm waters. Another issue arose at this point. Sooty Terns do not rest on the water! They either remain in flight or rest on patches of seaweed or on various flotsam and jetsam. In other words, when released from her carrying cage, Flo would have to fly.

Her cage was placed in an area with short grass and she was slowly coaxed outside. After a very brief and short distance flight, her initial reaction was to creep mouse-like slowly through the grass.



Note her long wings and webbed feet in left picture. One beautiful juvenile Sooty Tern!

Eventually, on three occasions she attempted to flap her wings but she did not lift off. After half an hour we all decided that Flo's release would not occur on Sunday. She was placed back in her cage and taken, at Lou's suggestion, to his rehab facility in Frisco. The plan is to keep her at the facility where she occupies a larger cage, and to continue feeding her as many small fish and pieces of squid as she can eat. Importantly, Lou has some spaces at his facility where birds can fly and he will provide Flo with opportunities to regain control of her flight systems. Once she can again fly, Lou will try to get her on a boat headed offshore or will take Flo back to the launching site next to the bay.



Lou Browning gently carrying Flo back to her carrier.

All of us – Melissa, Lou, the PBC team – wish Flo success in regaining her ability to fly swiftly and effortlessly out over blue waters. You can help too by supporting the work of wildlife rehabbers with your financial donations and volunteering of time. It is their efforts that will have returned Flo back home. Please contact Melissa, Roberta, Ann, or George for more information.

UPDATE 1: 10-10-18

The Tale of the Tern written by George Wheaton ended when Flo was unable to fly when released in a sheltered area. Lou Browning of Hatteras Island Wildlife Rehabilitation took Flo to the rehab center for additional care. After a few days of eating fish and being carefully monitored, Lou took her to one of the large flight cages to see if he could get her to fly. She did not appear to be interested. He motivated her by tossing her up and she flew about 30 feet. He walked behind her to motivate her and she flew another 10 feet. At that point Lou noticed her left wing was drooping slightly. He thought the wing asymmetry and possible subluxation might be evidence of an injury suffered during the storm, likely a result of extreme overexertion combatting the forces of the hurricane.

Lou Browning consulted with Melissia Coe at Piedmont Wildlife Rehab Center who cared for Flo when she was in Greensboro. They were concerned that Flo would not be able to fly continuously for the 4-5 years required of Sooty Terns prior to returning to the breeding

grounds in the islands of the Dry Tortugas, located west of the Florida Keys. They contacted Sylvan Heights Bird Park in Scotland Neck NC who was pleased to receive her and where she will become a bird educator. For more on Sylvan Heights Bird Park, visit shwpark.com.

Roberta A. Newton, PhD, FGSA, FAPTA

UPDATE 2: 10-14-18

PBC members I have had a message from Lou Browning that today he released the Sooty Tern. I tried to share the video from his Facebook page but could not. To view the video try Lou's Facebook page: Hatteras Island Wildlife Rehabilitation

Although I am sorry that Sylvan Heights did not get the bird, I am pleased he recovered and had a good release.

Thanks to everyone that helped! Melissa Coe