

The bird **below**, aglow in sunlight, has a simple, no-nonsense name: *white tern*. White terns are small seabirds found in the tropics around the globe. As you can see, they're completely snow-white, except for a ring of black feathers around

each eye. The eye rings give the birds a sweet, appealing look. Some people call them "fairy terns" because of their delicate features and the way they sometimes zip, "skip," and hover overhead.

Most of the time, white terns are out at sea. There, they dip into the water to snatch

tiny fish that swim near the surface. But the time comes each year to head for small islands and start families. *Ah, you think, the parents must build nests.* Wrong! Instead, each pair chooses a nesting spot—usually on a tree branch. Then the female lays her single egg—right there on the bare branch!



WOLFGANG KAEHLER/WKAEHLERPHOTO.COM

Who would think that a tree branch makes a good place to lay a roly-poly egg? (above) Only a white tern!



BALANCING ACT

This delicate bird pulls off a delicate trick. There's nothing else in the world quite like it!

BY ELLEN LAMBETH; PHOTOS BY EXPEDITIETEAM ALDABRA/FOTO NATURA/MINDEN PICTURES



◀ EASY DOES IT!

It's tricky to balance an egg on a branch. (For sure, a stiff wind can be an egg's worst enemy.) Sitting on the egg might help keep it in place, but the parents must take turns. How do they switch places without knocking their egg off? *Verrrry* carefully!



MALIE RICH-GRIFFITH/INFOCUSPHOTOS.COM

◀ FISHY TAKEOUT

Back and forth from sea to tree go the two parent terns. They're catching and delivering meals of tiny fish. Sometimes they catch several in a row, line them up in their bills, and feed them, one after the other, to their baby. The meal here looks like a real mouthful!

STICK-TIGHT CHICK

As soon as the egg hatches, the tern chick clings tightly to the branch. Good thing it has strong feet and claws, right out of the shell! A chick with grip can balance better than an egg, though strong winds can still make trouble. Either the mom or dad stays close for the first day or two. But soon, both are off on frequent fishing trips. After all, they need to keep their noisy little one fed—and find their own meals, too.



▲ READY FOR TAKE-OFF?

Maybe not quite. But the chick is definitely growing in its flight feathers and growing out of its fuzzy down. Soon, it will leave its branch behind for good. The parents will keep feeding it for a while. But it will quickly learn to fish for itself out at sea. With luck, it will one day return to the island—and begin a brand-new balancing act! 🐦