

News Release



Pacific Islands Fish and Wildlife Office
300 Ala Moana Boulevard, Room 3-122
Honolulu, Hawai'i 96850
Phone: 808.792.9400
Fax: 808.792.9580
<http://www.fws.gov/pacificislands>

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Contact: Ken Foote, 808 792 9535 or 282 9442

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Endangered Species Listing Not Warranted For the Black-footed Albatross

After a review of the best scientific and commercial information available, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined that listing the black-footed albatross as endangered or threatened throughout its range is not warranted. The result of the 12-month petition finding was published in the Federal Register today.

“Although at this time we believe the scientific information shows the black-footed albatross does not warrant listing as an endangered or threatened species, we encourage the public to continue to submit any new information concerning the status of or threats to the species,” said Loyal Mehrhoff, field supervisor for the Fish and Wildlife Service’s Pacific Islands Fish and Wildlife Office. “New information will help us monitor the status of the species and encourage conservation efforts.”

Three options were considered by the Service during the petition review: (1) listing the black-footed albatross throughout its range, (2) listing the Hawaiian breeding population of the black-footed albatross as a Distinct Population Segment (DPS), or (3) listing the Japanese breeding population of the black-footed albatross as a DPS. Although the Service determined that both populations meet the criteria to be considered for listing under the Act as a DPS, the Service also found that listing is not warranted for either the Hawaiian breeding population or the Japanese breeding population of the black-footed albatross.

A DPS is a portion of a vertebrate species’ or subspecies’ range that is geographically discrete from the rest of its kind and also is biologically or ecologically significant. The ESA allows the Service to add individual populations of species that meet DPS criteria to the endangered species list, even if the overall population of the species across its range does not warrant protection under the Act.

To determine if the black-footed albatross is an endangered or threatened species, the Service examined the following five factors: (1) the present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of its habitat or range; (2) overutilization for commercial, recreational, scientific, or educational purposes; (3) disease or predation; (4) the inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms; and (5) other natural and manmade factors affecting its continued existence.

Threats to the black-footed albatross evaluated include incidental mortality from longline fishing, ingestion of plastics, and effects of mercury and organochlorine contaminants such as PCBs and DDT. These chemicals, used in industry and agriculture, pose a toxicological risk and may interfere with reproduction. Rising sea levels and the loss of habitat on low-lying oceanic islands due to climate change is a potential threat of uncertain magnitude and effect. The best scientific and commercial information available do not demonstrate a population decline in the black-footed albatross. The Service acknowledges the presence of threats to the black-footed albatross, but finds the scientific data available are insufficient to demonstrate that these threats are having any population-level effect on the species, such that it would meet the definition of a threatened or endangered species.

The same analysis was applied to the Hawaiian Islands DPS and the Japanese Islands DPS of the black-footed albatross. Again in each case the Service found that although the black-footed albatross is subject to multiple threats, the fact that populations of the black-footed albatross appear to be relatively stable or even increasing across their range suggests that these threats are not so severe as to merit listing either DPS under the ESA.

Of the three North Pacific albatross species, the black-footed is the only dark-colored species. The plumage is uniformly sooty brown in color with a whitish ring at the base of the bill and a white patch behind the eye. Mature birds display a white patch above and below the tail. The bird's wingspan can reach 6 to 7 feet and their average weight is approximately 6 pounds. A surface feeder and scavenger, the primary natural prey of the black-footed albatross is thought to be flying fish eggs and squid.

Black-footed albatross can live as long as 40 to 50 years and are slow to mature with the first breeding typically occurring at 8 to 10 years of age. Pairs mate for life and breed a maximum of once each year with both adults providing care for the chick. Birds arrive in the Hawaiian nesting colonies in October, producing a single egg usually by early December. Eggs hatch between January and February, and chicks fledge by mid- to late July.

The total breeding population of the black-footed albatross numbers roughly 67,000 pairs, with 95 percent of the population nesting in the predator-free Northwestern Hawaiian Islands within Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. The majority of those are found on Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge and Laysan Island, within the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge. The remaining 5 percent of the birds nest on several remote islands in Japan. Exploitation of the species for eggs and feathers in the 19th and early 20th centuries eliminated breeding colonies on four islands or atolls and in two island groups across the Pacific.

On October 1, 2004, the Service received a petition from Earthjustice, on behalf of Turtle Islands Restoration Network and The Center for Biological Diversity, requesting that the Service list the black-footed albatross (*Phoebastria nigripes*) as a threatened or endangered species and that critical habitat be designated concurrently with the listing.

On October 9, 2007, the Service published the 90-day petition finding in the Federal Register stating the petition presented substantial scientific or commercial information indicating that listing may be warranted, and a status review was initiated. On August 26, 2009, the Service announced the reopening of the information collection period in response to the publication by the U.S. Geological Survey-Biological Resources Discipline of the *Status Assessment of the Laysan and Black-Footed Albatrosses, North Pacific Ocean, 1923-2005*.

Copies of the notice of the 12-month petition finding may be downloaded from the Service's website at <http://www.fws.gov/pacificislands/>. Prior to October 7, 2011, the petition finding will appear at: <http://www.ofr.gov/inspection.aspx>. For further information contact: Loyal Mehrhoff, Field Supervisor, Pacific Islands Fish and Wildlife Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 300 Ala Moana Boulevard, Room 3-122, Box 50088, Honolulu, Hawai'i 96850; telephone 808/ 792-9400 or fax 808/ 792-9581.

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