

BLACK-FOOTED ALBATROSS *Phoebastria nigripes*

Conservation Status

ALASKA: Highly Imperiled **N. AMERICAN: Highly Imperiled** **GLOBAL: Endangered**

Breed	Eggs	Incubation	Fledge	Nest	Feeding Behavior	Diet
Nov-June	1	~ 65 d	140 d	ground scrape	surface dip, scavenge	fish eggs, squid, fish, crustaceans, fish waste

Life History and Distribution

Although the Black-footed Albatross (*Phoebastria nigripes*) nests primarily in the Hawaiian Islands, it forages in Alaskan waters during the summer months.

Nonbreeders may remain in Alaska throughout the year and breeding birds also journey as far as Alaska to find food for their young (a flight of >5,000 miles roundtrip). While the Black-footed Albatross does not breed in Alaska, it is an Alaskan Bird of Conservation Concern because of recent declines and the occurrence of mortality in longline fisheries.

This species is one of three albatrosses found in Alaskan waters. The other two species are the Laysan Albatross (*Phoebastria immutabilis*) and the much rarer, federally endangered, Short-tailed Albatross (*Phoebastria albatrus*). The Black-footed Albatross is distinguished from the others by its entirely chocolate-brown plumage, legs and feet. The dark appearance is offset with a narrow strip of white at the base of the bill and under the eyes. About 10% of adults also have white at the base of the tail and under the tail. Males, females, and juvenile birds have similar plumage. Black-footed Albatrosses nest in colonies with Laysan Albatrosses and hybridizations occur rarely.

Nesting is restricted to the remote Northwestern Hawaiian Islands with the exception of small breeding colonies off Japan. This species prefers to nest on low coral and sand islands.

Once fledged, juveniles leave the breeding grounds and remain on the open seas until they are about three years old. At that time, they return to where they were born, but do not begin to breed until they are around five years old. Pair bonds are established through ritualized display postures or “dances.” The pair bond remains intact until a mate dies or disappears.

Except during the breeding season, Black-footed Albatrosses do not come to land. Perfectly adapted for a life at sea, they utilize dynamic soaring to remain airborne for hours. Birds land on the water only to rest or feed. They forage predominantly during the day for flying fish eggs, squid, crustaceans, fish, and zooplankton found on the surface of the ocean. Fish waste discarded from fishing vessels is also part of the diet.

In Alaska, Black-footed Albatrosses are found primarily in the northern portion of the Gulf of Alaska. Fewer numbers have also been observed near Nunivak



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Island in the northern Bering Sea, along the Aleutian Islands, and in Southeast Alaska.

Alaska Seasonal Distribution

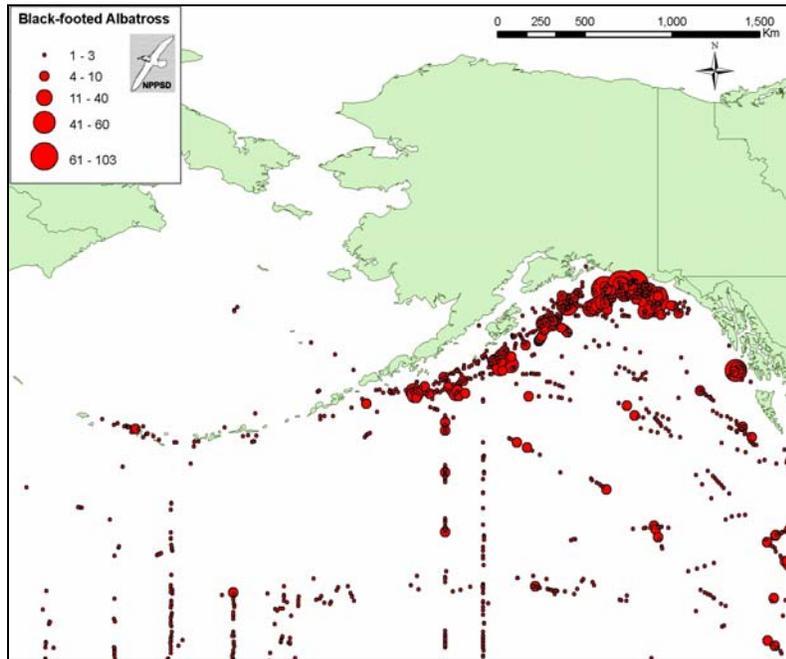
AK Region	Sp	S	F	W
Southeastern	C	C	C	-
Southcoastal	C	C	C	R
Southwestern	C	C	C	R
Central	-	-	-	-
Western	R	R	R	-
Northern	-	-	-	-

C= Common, U= Uncommon, R= Rare, += Casual or accidental, - = Not known to occur, * = Known or probable breeder, Sp= Mar-May, S= June and July, F= Aug-Nov, W= Dec-Feb. © Armstrong 1995.

Population Estimates and Trends

In 2003-2004, the total breeding population was estimated at 58,000 breeding pairs. More than 95% of the population breeds in the Hawaiian Islands. The largest colonies are found on Laysan Island (19,500 pairs) and Midway Island (20,400 pairs).

At the turn of the 20th century the population was decimated by feather hunters, and later, by the introduction of rabbits, which destroyed nesting habitat. In the 1950s and 1960s the population was decreased by tens of thousands of birds in order to reduce the incidence of collisions with military aircraft. The population rebounded from these dramatic population declines, but over the last decade, populations at the largest Hawaiian colonies appear to have slightly declined.



Distribution of Black-footed Albatrosses in Alaska as determined from boat-based surveys conducted between 1974-1989. Seabird distribution maps created from data provided by the North Pacific Pelagic Seabird Database (NPPSD) Version 1.0, 2005. USGS Alaska Science Center & U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, Alaska. <http://www.absc.usgs.gov/research/NPPSD>

Conservation Concerns and Actions

The greatest current threat to this species is mortality from accidental bycatch in the commercial longline fisheries in the North Pacific. Mortality of Black-footed Albatrosses has been recorded from the longline fisheries in Hawaii and Alaska. This probably only represents a portion of the fishing mortality that occurs. Bycatch in longline fisheries conducted in the North Pacific by Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Russia, and China also occurs.

Between 1990 and 1994, it is estimated that >23,000 Black-footed Albatrosses were drowned after being caught on longline hooks set by the North Pacific swordfish fishery. An estimated 1,800 were killed annually, by the Hawaiian longline fishery alone, between 1994 and 1998. Additionally, between 133-216 Black-footed Albatrosses were killed annually in the Gulf of Alaska demersal longline fisheries between 1993-2003.

Considerable effort has been made towards decreasing seabird bycatch. The Hawaiian longline fisheries for swordfish was closed in 2001 and bycatch of Black-footed Albatrosses decreased to <100 birds per year. In Alaska, research and development of methods to reduce seabird bycatch in the longline fisheries has met with favorable results. In 1997, the National Marine Fisheries Service initiated mandatory employment of seabird deterrent devices. Regulations were for longline vessels fishing for groundfish in Alaskan waters, adjacent to the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands and the Gulf of Alaska.

A serious conservation concern is plastics ingestion. If nestlings are fed plastics that parents find at sea (entangled with food), their food and water intake is reduced. This can potentially cause dehydration, starvation and death of the chicks.

Recommended Management Actions

- Monitor populations and distribution in Alaskan waters.
- Continue monitoring of breeding populations in the Hawaiian Islands.
- Compile, analyze, and report data on Black-footed Albatrosses from the North Pacific Pelagic Seabird Database and NOAA Seabird Observer Program to identify summer and fall distribution of the species in Alaskan waters.
- Support efforts to estimate and minimize mortality from all U.S. and foreign fisheries.
 - Support seabird bycatch reduction workshops for other countries in the North Pacific.
 - Support continued research and development of mitigation measures to prevent mortality in fisheries.

Regional Contact

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References

Armstrong 1995; IUCN Internet Website (2005); Kushlan *et al.* 2002; NOAA Internet Website (2005); U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2005, 2002; Whittow 1993a.

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