

# Creative Parenting Gets Results

by Ferrisa Connell



A short-tailed albatross chick “meets” a decoy on Mukojima Island. Greg Balogh, USFWS

**I**t takes a village to raise a child. This old proverb certainly applies to the ongoing effort to recover the short-tailed albatross (*Phoebastria albatrus*). Thanks to some creative problem solving on the part of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and its many conservation partners, both national and international, significant progress has been made in creating a safe home and bright future for this federally endangered bird.

With its golden head and distinctive bubble-gum pink bill, the short-tailed albatross, or STAL, is the largest of the three albatross species inhabiting the North Pacific. It was also once the most abundant. This magnificent bird was driven nearly to extinction before the turn of the 20th Century—a victim of the feather trade. The Service

listed the species as endangered under the Endangered Species Act in 2000. The STAL is of particular interest in the U.S., because afterbreeding on small islands in the western Pacific, these long-distance fliers soar across the Pacific to feed in the nutrient-rich waters of Alaska’s Aleutian Islands.

Currently, there are just two places in the world where these birds nest: Japan’s Torishima Island, which hosts approximately 85 percent of the world’s breeding population; and the Senkaku Islands, to the southwest of Torishima. Torishima is an active volcano, and the main breeding site here is precariously located on a steep eroding slope, where nests are vulnerable to landslides. Volcanism is not a threat to those birds breeding on the Senkaku Islands, but the islands may support substantial oil and gas

reserves—a factor that has heightened the intensity of sovereignty disputes among Japan, China, and Taiwan. This makes site visits and monitoring virtually impossible.

The goal of the Short-tailed Albatross Recovery Plan, completed in 2008, is to remove or reduce threats and increase population numbers to the point where Endangered Species Act protection is no longer necessary. The plan also calls for the establishment of at least one additional breeding colony in a safe and protected location within the bird’s former range.

How do you establish a new seabird colony? Translocation and subsequent rearing of chicks had been successfully accomplished for several species of burrow-nesting sea birds, including shearwaters and petrels, but such

methods had never been developed for surface-nesting birds like the albatross.

Armed with little knowledge, Service biologists, with support from Japan's Yamashina Institute for Ornithology (YIO), embarked on a round of pilot studies to develop techniques for translocating and rearing albatross chicks. Laysan albatross (*Phoebastria immutabilis*) and black-footed albatross (*Phoebastria nigripes*) chicks, species that are more abundant in the North Pacific, were used as research surrogates. In 2006, 10 Laysan albatross chicks were translocated from Hawaii's Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge to Kilauea Point National Wildlife Refuge. Only four of these chicks survived long enough to fledge, prompting biologists to refine their food handling, preparation methods, and chick handling techniques. In the second year of study, 9 out of 10 black-footed albatross chicks that were translocated to Mukojima, the site selected for the new colony fledged in 2007.

With this encouraging success rate, the Recovery Team was ready to move forward. In February 2008, YIO biologists transported 10 STAL chicks to Mukojima a historical nesting island located about 217 miles (350 kilometers) south of Torishima., Realistic short-tailed albatross decoys and a sound system playing calls from the Torishima colony enhanced the authenticity of the site for the chicks as well as for potential albatross visitors. All 10 chicks relocated to this site fledged that May. This effort was so successful that YIO biologists decided to relocate and rear 15 STAL chicks each following year. As of 2012, 69 of the 70 translocated chicks have fledged, and at least 9 subadults, including 6 from the 2008 and 2009 group, have been observed practicing courtship rituals at the

translocation site—hinting that at least some of the hand reared chicks may consider Mukojima a nesting site by the time they reach reproductive maturity. Additionally, biologists have discovered that some parent-reared juvenile STALs have been attracted to Mukojima and have been seen exhibiting courtship behavior. The attraction of other STALs to Mukojima is an encouraging sign that the colony may grow faster than hoped.

This year marks the fifth and final year of the Short-tailed Albatross Translocation Project, but it is by no means the final chapter for STAL

recovery. It will be at least another year before any of the translocated chicks are of the age (5 years) to reproduce. Biologists may know then if Mukojima will serve as an active and functional STAL breeding site. Thanks to some creative parenting, the future for these rare birds is the brightest it has been in quite some time.

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**Translocated short-tailed albatross chicks check out their new home on Mukojima Island.**

*Photo courtesy of Yamashina Institute for Ornithology.*

