



Threatened and Endangered Species

Short-Tailed Albatross

(Phoebastria albatrus)

With a wingspan of over 2 meters (7 feet), the short-tailed albatross is the largest seabird in the North Pacific. Its long, narrow wings are adapted to soaring low over the ocean. It is best distinguishable from other albatrosses by its large, bubblegum-pink bill. Young birds also have the large pink bill, but their feathers are dark chocolate brown. Birds become progressively whiter with age. Full adult plumage (at 8 years of age and older) includes an entirely white back, white or light gold head and back of neck, and black and white wings.

Status

The short-tailed albatross is listed as endangered throughout its range (Federal Register; July 31, 2000).

Range and Population Size

Historically, millions of short-tailed albatrosses bred in the western North Pacific on several islands south of the main islands of Japan. Today, most breeding activity occurs at two island colonies: the largest, on Torishima, is home to about 85% of the world's population; and the remainder nest on Minami Kojima, in the Senkaku Island Group, northwest of Taiwan. A single nest on Midway Island, Hawaii produced a chick in 2011. Short-tailed albatrosses forage widely across the temperate and subarctic North Pacific, and can be seen in the Gulf of Alaska, along the Aleutian Islands, and in the Bering Sea. The world population is currently estimated to be about 3,000 birds and is increasing at a rate of between 5 and 8% per year.

Habitat and Habits

Like many seabirds, short-tailed albatrosses are slow to reproduce and are long-lived, with some known to be over 40 years old. They begin breeding at about 5-6 years of age and mate for life. They nest on volcanic ash or grassy terraces on rugged, isolated, windswept islands. Pairs lay

Hiroshi Hasegawa / Toho University



Short-tailed albatross courtship display on Torishima Island.

a single egg each year (or every other year) in October or November. Eggs hatch in late December through early January. Chicks remain flightless and dependent on their parents for about 5 months.

After breeding, short-tailed albatrosses move to feeding areas in the North Pacific. When feeding, albatrosses alight on the ocean surface and seize prey with their bills. Prey items include squid, fish, and shrimp. Short-tailed albatross are also attracted to bait from longline vessels used in commercial fisheries.

Reasons for Current Status

Short-tailed albatrosses have survived multiple threats to their existence. At the beginning of the 20th century, the short-tailed albatross was nearly extinct, primarily as a result of hunting at the breeding colonies in Japan. Albatrosses were killed for their feathers and various other body parts. Between the late 1800s and early 1900s, an estimated five million

short-tailed albatrosses were harvested from a single breeding colony on Torishima. Even as late as the 1930s, substantial albatross harvest continued. By 1949, there were no short-tailed albatrosses breeding at any of the historically known breeding sites, including Torishima, and the species was thought to be extinct. In the early 1950s, however, a few breeding pairs began to show up on Torishima. These were presumably birds that had been wandering the North Pacific during the final years of slaughter. Loss of nesting habitat to volcanic eruptions and severe storms continue to be natural threats to short-tailed albatrosses today.

Human-induced threats include hooking and drowning on commercial longline gear, ingestion of plastic debris, contamination from oil spills, and possibly collision with vessel rigging and entanglement in derelict fishing gear.



First cohort of chicks (2008) moved from Torishima just set down on the Mukojima colony site check out their new home.

Management and Protection

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) works closely with the commercial fishing industry to minimize take of short-tailed albatross. The Service, in collaboration with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), University of Washington Sea Grant program, and Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission, supplies free tori line (streamer line) kits to any Alaskan commercial longline vessel owner/operator who requests them. To reduce the incidental take of seabirds by the fishing industry, including the short-tailed albatross, the NMFS requires the Alaska longline fisheries to employ bird avoidance techniques such as using streamer lines with performance standards specified in regulations (50CFR679). Fishermen are strongly encouraged to develop new, innovative techniques to avoid catching birds.

The government of Japan provides legal protection to the short-tailed albatross as a Special National Monument and a Special Bird of Protection. The main nesting island, Torishima, is protected as a National Monument. Japan has improved the

nesting habitat of the main colony on Torishima by planting grass at the colony site to stabilize soils and provide cover. Efforts to establish a second nesting colony in an area less prone to erosion and outwash on Torishima continue with great success. Minami-Kojima, where approximately 15% of the birds breed, is currently in an area of disputed ownership between Japan, China, and Taiwan. The dispute over ownership prevents scientists from monitoring or aiding in the recovery of the birds that nest there.

In 2008, the Service, in collaboration with the Japanese Ministry of the Environment, Yamashina Institute for Ornithology, and Oregon State University, embarked on an historic attempt to translocate short-tailed albatross chicks to Mukojima for the purpose of starting a new breeding colony. Mukojima is a newly designated UNESCO World Heritage Site that is non-volcanic and is not in politically disputed territory. Since 2008, 55 six-week-old short-tailed albatross chicks were moved from their natal nest on Torishima and hand-reared on the “safe” island of

Mukojima. Our goal is for 70 chicks to fledge from Mukojima by 2012.

So far, 100% of the hand-reared chicks successfully fledged from Mukojima, and we anxiously await their eventual return to Mukojima to breed. We have had hopeful signs that the fledglings recognized Mukojima as their future nesting site when 3 year old subadults returned to Mukojima and were observed practicing their mating dance—a ritual that is a prelude to breeding. The establishment of a third, “safe” breeding colony is required for recovering this endangered bird.

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