



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

News Release

Pacific Islands External Affairs Office

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Albatross Chicks Take Flight To Help Their Short-tailed Cousins

*Pilot Project Will Expand Knowledge to
Benefit the Endangered Short-tailed Albatross*

Ten special visitors are scheduled to arrive in Kauai today, announced the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Ten Laysan albatross chicks – approximately one month old – are making the 1,000-mile journey from Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge/Battle of Midway National Memorial to Kilauea Point National Wildlife Refuge for a new life on the Garden Island. The new arrivals are part of a pilot study to gain more experience in the handling and rearing of albatross chicks.

These down-covered chicks bring hope to the survival of another albatross species only known to breed in Japan. The short-tailed albatross, also known as the “golden gooney,” is on the brink of extinction. Knowledge gained from this pilot project will help researchers in Japan relocate birds to establish new breeding colonies which will help in the recovery of the species.

By translocating chicks to a safer new colony site in Japan, researchers hope to “jump start” the process of new colony formation, thus speeding up the recovery process. The preliminary step of translocating Laysan albatross chicks (a relatively abundant species) will provide the knowledge needed in the handling and rearing of the albatross chicks, in order to minimize risks to the endangered short-tailed albatross during future translocations.

“This unique pilot project allows us to share our previous knowledge and experience with our Japanese counterparts across the Pacific while also expanding that knowledge and experience through cooperative efforts to recover this endangered seabird,” said Barry Stieglitz, project leader for the Hawaiian and Pacific Islands National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

The chicks were gently captured by hand on Sand Island, one of three islands that make up the Midway Atoll NWR, by refuge staff. The young seabirds, placed in individual shipping containers, are being flown from Midway to Kauai on a chartered plane.

Once the chicks arrive at the Lihue Airport in Kauai, they are subject to a routine series of inspections and health tests required by state and federal law. The chicks will be examined and tested for avian influenza, external and internal parasites, and overall health by U.S. Geological Survey veterinarian Thierry Work. Depending on the results, the chicks may or may not have to be quarantined for a brief period of time. The chicks will then be transported to Kilauea Point NWR where they will be weighed, tagged, and released in a secured location for rearing.

“The rearing site is within a portion of the refuge previously closed to public entry to protect and minimize disturbance to wildlife. It is a beautiful area for albatross, on a protected

ridge overlooking the ocean with tradewinds needed for their first flight in a few months,” said Brenda Zaun, Kilauea Point NWR biologist. “Chicks will be fed an appropriate diet and their weights regularly monitored until they fledge sometime in July.”

Zaun will work closely with Dr. Tomohiro Deguchi – an expert in avian husbandry and graduate research assistant, Tomaka Harada of the Yamashina Institute of Ornithology – who will be responsible for the daily feeding, rearing activities, and data collection during the pilot study. Other non-federal partners involved in the study include Toho University, Japan and Linda Elliot of the Hawaii Wildlife Center.

The short-tailed albatross (*Phoebastria albatrus*) was possibly the most abundant of the three North Pacific albatross species. Millions of these birds were harvested by feather hunters prior to and following the turn of the 20th century, resulting in the drastic decline of the species by the mid-20th century. Fewer than 2,000 birds are known to exist today. The species is known to breed on only two remote sites (Torishima and Senkaku) in the western Pacific. Torishima Island, where 80 to 85 percent of the species breed, is an active volcano, and the natural colony site on the island is susceptible to mudslides and erosion. An artificial colony site has been established in a less erosive area on the island. The other breeding site in the Senkaku Islands, located to the southwest of Torishima, is subject to political uncertainty, jurisdiction disputes, and oil exploration.

The short-tailed albatross is a large pelagic bird with long narrow wings adapted for soaring just above the ocean surface. The bill is large, bright pink and hooked with a bluish tip, has external tubular nostrils, and has a thin but conspicuous black line extending around the base. Adult short-tailed albatrosses are the only northern Pacific albatross with an entirely white back. The white head develops a yellow-gold crown and nape in mature adult birds.

The Laysan albatross has a white head, neck, and underbody with a dark eye patch. The top of the wings are black and the bill varies from gray to yellow with a darker tip. Legs and feet are pink. Midway Atoll NWR hosts the world’s largest populations of Laysan and Black-footed albatrosses. In 2005, 487,527 Laysan albatross nests were counted on Midway Atoll NWR.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the nearly 100-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

Note to Editors: Images are available by calling Ken Foote at 808 792 9535