

Lead Poisoning of Midway Albatrosses Must End, Says ABC

ABC has renewed calls to Congress to provide funding to clean up 70 lead paint-contaminated buildings on Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge. The buildings have been responsible for the deaths of as many as 130,000 Laysan Albatross chicks since jurisdiction of Midway was transferred from the Navy to the Department of the Interior in 1996. ABC wrote letters to the House Resources and Interior Appropriations Committees to elevate the importance of the issue, and followed up with funding requests.

Lead is fatal to birds even in small doses. The pathetic annual spectacle of thousands of emaciated chicks unable to lift their wings, dying a slow and painful death, is a stark reminder of the threats that still confront the world's largest population of Laysan Albatrosses.

In a paper to be released in the scientific journal, *Animal Conservation*, Dr. Myra Finkelstein of the University of California-Santa Cruz and co-authors, including scientists and managers from the U.S. Geological Survey and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, concluded that the deaths of Laysan Albatross chicks from lead exposure on Midway has long-term consequences for the population. By 2060, there may be as many as 190,000 fewer albatrosses due to lead poisoning. By contrast, removing lead-based paint now could increase the population by up to 360,000 by 2060. When the paper was published, the Center for Biological Diversity quickly initiated a lawsuit, claiming that the lead also affects the endangered Laysan Duck.

The Midway Atoll is located in the North Pacific Ocean, about 1,250 miles northwest of Honolulu. It comprises an elliptical outer reef nearly five miles in diameter, with 580,000 acres of submerged reef and ocean, and three flat coral islands totaling approximately 1,500 acres.



This Laysan Albatross chick is suffering from drooping due to lead exposure, and will never be able to fly. The chick will eventually succumb to starvation. Photo: Myra Finkelstein

The Department of Interior estimates that \$5.6 million is needed to clean up the remaining toxic lead paint on Midway. Approximately 70 of the federally-owned buildings must be stripped of all lead-based paint, and sand surrounding the buildings thoroughly sifted to remove toxic paint chips. Despite the lack of dedicated funding, the Fish and Wildlife Service has managed to remove paint from approximately 25 buildings, but Interior officials have stated that the current federal budget for the nation's wildlife refuge system is insufficient to prevent the continued ingestion of lead paint by Laysan Albatross chicks at the remaining structures. Contact Jessica Hardesty Norris, ABC, <jhardesty@abcbirds.org>.

Old buildings with peeling, lead-contaminated paint prove fatal for many albatross chicks on Midway. Photo: Forest and Kim Starr

