

Chatham Albatross



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Artwork by *Maria Lucia Bendasoli*

THE CHATHAM ALBATROSS is one of 11 species of 'mollymawk' albatrosses in the genus *Thalassarche*. It falls within a "sister group" of four closely related "shy-type" albatrosses, which includes Salvin's, Shy and White-capped Albatrosses. These four, now each recognized as a full species, are centred in the Australasian region. "Shy-types" are a little larger than the two yellow-nosed and Buller's mollymawks. The visual differences between them are largely on how much yellow there is on the bill and the amount of grey on the head and neck. Chatham Albatross, with its all yellow bill (when adult) and dark grey head and neck is perhaps the most striking of



the four. Its breeding is restricted to The Pyramid, a remarkable towering pinnacle off New Zealand's Chatham Islands.

The species' at-sea distribution extends to Australian waters and to the Pacific coast of southern South America (Chile and Peru). Like all the albatrosses it feeds by surface-seizing live and dead prey (fish, squid and crustaceans). There are about 5300 breeding pairs, giving "a total estimated global population of c. 11 000 mature individuals, roughly equating to c.16 000 individuals in total" (which includes juvenile and pre-breeding individuals). This contrasts with an estimated 1.4 million Black-browed albatrosses, another mollymawk, that breed at many sub-Antarctic sites around the Southern Ocean.

Because of its single-site breeding status the species has a global conservation status of Vulnerable (and of Naturally Uncommon in New Zealand) even though its population is currently regarded as stable. The Pyramid, which is privately owned, is susceptible to rough seas washing away the little soil and low vegetation that exists on its otherwise bare (and steep) rock substratum, lowering breeding success as the birds then struggle to construct their pedestal nests. Mortality caused by longline and trawl fisheries is also a concern – as for nearly all albatross species. More information is particularly needed on bycatch off Peru by artisanal fisheries. There also may be some "harvesting" of chicks by the local community, but firm evidence appears to be lacking. The Chatham Albatross has been relatively little studied, probably mainly due to the difficulty of access to its breeding site.

A recent effort has been made over several breeding seasons to establish a second breeding colony on the main Chatham Island by translocating chicks from The Pyramid and then hand-rearing them until fledging in the hope they will eventually return to the new site, attracted by decoys and broadcasted calls. However, so far it seems the translocated chicks, identified by colour bands, are instead returning as juveniles to The Pyramid.

Sources:

ACAP 2012. Chatham Albatross *Thalassarche eremita*; <https://acap.aq/en/acap-species>

BirdLife International 2020. Species factsheet: *Thalassarche eremita*; <http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/chatham-albatross-thalassarche-eremita/text>

Fraser, M.J. 2013 [updated 2017]. Chatham Island Mollymawk. In: Miskelly, C.M. (Ed). *New Zealand Birds Online*; <http://nzbirdsonline.org.nz/species/chatham-island-mollymawk>

John Cooper, ACAP Information Officer, 21 January 2020