

Short-tailed Albatross



Agreement on the Conservation
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Artwork by *Lucimara Wesolowicz* from a photograph by *Laurie Johnson*



THE SHORT-TAILED ALBATROSS is one of four species in the genus *Phoebastria* that inhabit the northern hemisphere Pacific Ocean; the others are the Black-footed, Laysan and Waved. The group's range extends from Ecuador's Galapagos Islands on the Equator (where the Waved breeds) to islands south of Japan. Black-footed and Laysan albatrosses have the widest breeding range, from Mexican to Japanese islands, with their centre in the USA's North Western

Hawaiian Islands. Balancing its hugely reduced population (once numbering in the millions) and very few currently existing breeding sites against an upward population trend has resulted in a global threat category of Vulnerable for the Short-tailed Albatross.

The Short-tailed, also known as Steller's Albatross in some older accounts, came close to extinction. Excessive exploitation for its feathers, eggs and guano led to the collapse and disappearance of many colonies on islands throughout the North Pacific in the 19th and early 20th centuries. A remnant population on Japan's Torishima just survived, probably due to a few juveniles avoiding the end of the exploitation era by staying at sea until they reached breeding age (with six pairs breeding in 1954 after being thought extinct five years previously). Torishima now has a steadily growing population that has exceeded 600 annually breeding pairs in the last five years, with an estimated total island population of around 3500 birds. A second, smaller population of perhaps an overall 650 individuals (though genetically distinct) breeds on the disputed (by China and Japan) Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands for which there is no recent information on its size and trends due to restrictions on landings. A few birds breed on Japan's Ogasawara (Bonin) Islands. Two different pairs (at different times) have bred successfully on the USA's Midway Atoll in the North Western Hawaiian Islands. A long-standing female-female pair lays infertile eggs on Kure Atoll at the western extremity of the North Western Hawaiian Islands.

The species' diet is relatively little known but includes fish and squid obtained by surface seizing. While in coastal waters it is at risk from longline fishing mortality, partially addressed by the adoption along the eastern seaboard of mitigation measures such as deploying bird-scaring lines. The Short-tailed Albatross is larger than its congeners, with a striking appearance in largely black and white adult plumage, bright pink bill with a bluish tip and 'Golden Gooney' head and neck. Young birds can retain juvenile brown plumage into their breeding years.

Japan has translocated and hand-fed to fledging 70 Short-tailed chicks collected from Torishima on an Ogasawara island over five consecutive years. It is still too early to say whether this will create a new colony safe from a possible eruption on Torishima which is an active volcano that has killed birds during eruptions (and by landslides) in the past. However, some birds have revisited and two have bred. Decoys and broadcasted calls have been used to attract birds to Midway.

Sources:

ACAP 2012. Short-tailed Albatross *Phoebastria albatrus*; <https://www.acap.aq/en/acap-species>

BirdLife International 2020. Species factsheet: *Phoebastria albatrus*; <http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/short-tailed-albatross-phoebastria-albatrus/text>

John Cooper, ACAP Information Officer, 25 February 2020