

Why Avoiding Albatross Bycatch Is Important



Albatrosses are the most threatened seabird family in the world, and fisheries bycatch is the leading cause of albatross mortality at sea. Controlling bycatch is fundamental to sustainable fisheries and maintaining healthy albatross populations.

Overlap with fisheries Albatrosses are opportunistic foragers that take advantage of diverse food items including food scraps made available at the ocean surface by humans and other predators. Foraging by albatrosses behind fishing vessels occurs most often when the vessels are fishing within the bird's preferred natural habitats. For example, the greatest interaction between albatrosses and demersal fisheries in the northeast Pacific is with the sablefish fishery because both occur over outer continental shelf and slope waters.

Vulnerable biology Albatrosses are more vulnerable to increased mortality than many bird species because they have life-history traits that are similar to marine mammals:

- They are long-lived — the oldest living albatross is more than 65 years old.
- They are late to reach maturity — first breeding is at 4-13 years old.
- They have a low reproductive rate — breeding pairs rear only one offspring per year or every other year.



Compounding threats Many albatrosses nest on remote, low-lying atolls that are susceptible to tsunamis, storm surges and sea level rise, or that have introduced mammals that prey upon albatrosses and damage nests. These hazards along with fisheries bycatch — which is preventable — have resulted in 15 of the 22 species being listed as in danger of extinction by international criteria.



Buried albatrosses from tsunami flooding, Midway Atoll. With climate change, flooding may become more frequent.

North Pacific albatross populations The short-tailed albatross is the most endangered of the North Pacific albatrosses and is recovering from near extinction in the mid-20th century (see other side). Black-footed and Laysan albatrosses have higher population numbers but population trends are poorly understood. All three species have been reported as bycatch in longline fisheries off the U.S. west coast and Alaska, and Hawaiian fisheries have reported taking black-footed and Laysan albatrosses. Approximately 1,000 albatrosses are caught each year in all U.S. North Pacific fisheries combined and that number is likely to be eight times that or more in non-U.S. fisheries of the North Pacific. Black-footed albatross bycatch may be at a critical stage where an increase in bycatch could trigger a population decline.

Population size of the three North Pacific albatrosses.

Species	Population size (breeding pairs)
Short-tailed	1,400
Black-footed	61,700
Laysan	590,000

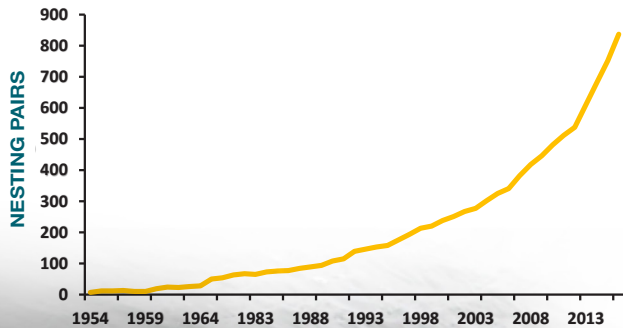
SHORT-TAILED ALBATROSSES ON THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

Near extinction In the late 1800s and early 1900s, millions of short-tailed albatrosses were harvested commercially at their nesting colonies. By the 1940s, this species was perilously close to extinction — no adult birds remained on the approximately 12 nesting islands in the western North Pacific Ocean, off Asia. Fortunately, subadult birds spend multiple years at sea and the very few remaining eventually returned to nest.

Recolonization and growth Young birds at sea that survived harvesting efforts began returning to one nesting colony (Torishima) in 1951 and a second colony (in the Senkaku Islands) by 1971. The population has grown to perhaps 4,000–5,000 birds as of 2016.

Continued conservation concern The current population size, however, is still less than 1% of the historical population size. The largest colony is on Torishima, an active volcano off Japan, and the Senkaku Islands are an internationally disputed territory. Recolonization of a third former nesting island is a requirement for recovery and delisting from the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

Population growth at the largest colony, Torishima, Japan.



Recovery Through international conservation efforts by the U.S. and Japan, recolonization of a third island has begun. Reintroductions have resulted in three pairs of short-tailed albatrosses nesting in the Ogasawara (Bonin) Islands, Japan — the first at this historical nesting site since this species' extirpation in the late 1940s. Because albatrosses are long-lived and very slow to recolonize new areas, short-tails may take another 25–50 years to meet all recovery criteria. Consequently, continued vigilance to reduce fisheries bycatch is critical to expedite the recovery of this species.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

fws.gov/alaska/fisheries/fieldoffice/anchorage/stall/index.htm

Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels, Species Accounts

acap.aq/en/acap-species

Photos courtesy of USFWS, Washington Sea Grant and Oregon State University.



University of Washington
wsg.washington.edu

WSG-AS 16-06 • 1-17



Short-tailed albatross (adult)

Black-footed albatross

Laysan albatross

Short-tailed albatross (juvenile)