



Photo: Forest and Kim Starr, USFWS

## Seabirds

# Short-tailed albatross

*Phoebastria albatrus*

### SPECIES STATUS:

Federally Listed as Endangered

State Listed as Endangered

NatureServe Heritage Rank G1 - Critically Imperiled

IUCN Red List Ranking - Vulnerable

**SPECIES INFORMATION:** The short-tailed albatross is the largest seabird (Family: Diomedidae) found in Hawai'i. Adult males and females are mostly white, with varying amounts of black, mostly on the upper side of the wings, and a golden wash on the head. Huge pink bill has a bluish tip and legs and feet are pale pink. Like other albatrosses, they use air currents to glide and soar for long periods of time and feed by seizing prey from the surface while sitting on the water. They forage closer to land than other albatross species. Scavenges from carrion and follows fishing boats. In Japan, their diet consists primarily of shrimp, squid, and fish, including bonito, flyingfish, and sardines. As far back as the 1930s, individuals have occurred among nesting mōlī or Laysan (*P. immutabilis*) and ka'upu or black-footed (*P. nigripes*) albatross at Midway Atoll. See fact sheets for mōlī or ka'upu for details of breeding biology. Like other albatrosses, the short-tailed albatross likely has a life span of at least 50 years.

**DISTRIBUTION:** Small numbers of birds nest on Midway Atoll and Kure Atoll in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. Outside of Hawai'i, the species nests on several small islands offshore of Japan. At sea, the short-tailed albatross ranges widely across the north Pacific Ocean.

**ABUNDANCE:** The worldwide population is estimated at 4,350 individuals, with an increasing population trend. The population in the Hawaiian Islands is very small; one pair has nested at Midway Atoll since 2011, and another pair (suspected female-female pair) has attempted to breed at Kure Atoll since 2010.

**LOCATION AND CONDITION OF KEY HABITAT:** **Terrestrial:** Nests on islands and atolls. Nests are similar to other albatross species. **Marine:** Pelagic.

**THREATS:** The primary threat to this species is the limited breeding distribution, and a catastrophic event at one of the main colonies could have detrimental effect on the population. Other threats to the short-tailed albatross include the following:

- Human disturbance and conflict. Historically the most common albatross in the north Pacific Ocean, the species' population numbered in the millions. By the 1930s the short-tailed albatross was thought to be extinct as a result of wanton killing for their feathers (millinery trade).

- Fishery bycatch. U.S. longline fisheries bycatch has been greatly reduced in the last 10-20 years and associated mortalities is thought to be infrequent and low. However, the amount of bycatch mortality from fisheries outside of U.S. waters is relatively unknown and remains a potential threat to the species.
- Marine pollution. As is true for other albatrosses, ingestion of plastic debris and toxic effects of oil, metals, mercury, and persistent organic pollutants are threats.
- Catastrophic events. Volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, landslides, and typhoons at breeding colonies have caused reproductive failures on nesting colonies in Japan.

**CONSERVATION ACTIONS:** Conservation actions for short-tailed albatross should include the following:

- Continue social attraction project (e.g., decoys and playing of vocalizations) to establish a breeding population on Midway Atoll.
- Continue efforts to reduce fisheries-related seabird bycatch.
- Continue protection and management of existing wildlife sanctuaries and refuges.

**MONITORING:** Continue satellite tracking of short-tailed albatross to determine at-sea distribution. Continue monitoring of nesting pairs on Midway Atoll and Kure Atoll.

**RESEARCH PRIORITIES:**

- Estimate annual mortality from U.S. and foreign fisheries bycatch and use demographic models to determine the effect of this mortality on population.
- Research and develop techniques and gear to minimize seabird bycatch.
- Evaluate molting behavior and assess potential vulnerability to oil spills or collisions with vessels during molt.
- Evaluate potential changes to prey availability as a result of climate change.
- Conduct contaminants analyses on addled eggs, feathers, and dead birds as they are available.

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