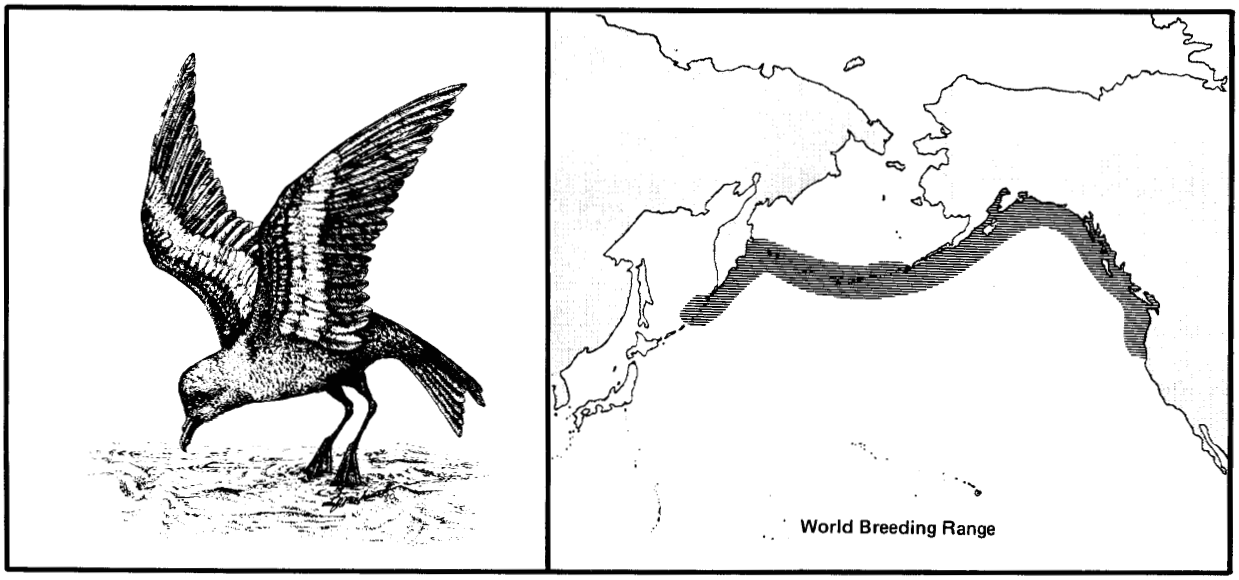
Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel *(Oceanodroma furcata)*



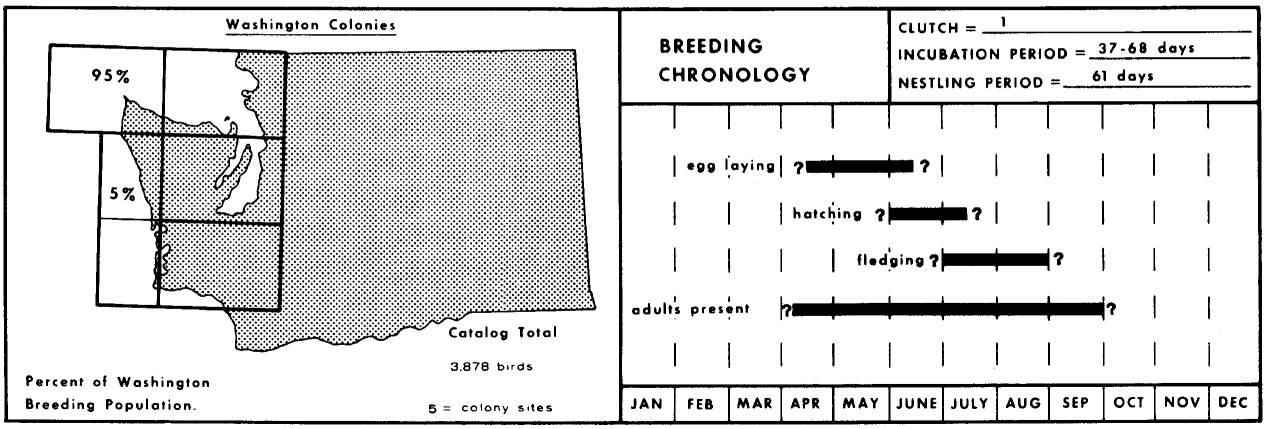
Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels are among the smallest seabirds, yet they range far from land over the mid-ocean waters. They usually feed on surface plankton, but they follow fishing vessels and forage on oil and offal when the opportunity arises. They are abundant over large areas of the cooler waters of the North Pacific and are frequently seen over the outer continental shelf waters of Washington and pelagic waters farther offshore.

Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels breed on offshore islands where they are secure from land-based predators. Throughout their range they nest in both rocky crevices and, to a lesser extent, in burrows in soil.

To avoid diurnal predators, colony activity occurs during the darkest hours of the night. Adults mate, exchange incubation and brooding duties, and feed chicks only during the night, remaining in the burrow or returning offshore by day. For this reason, storm-petrels are seldom seen near breeding colonies during the day. Their nocturnal habits make detection of colonies difficult and estimation of populations imprecise.

WASHINGTON COLONIES

Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels have been found breeding at five sites in Washington, all of them along the outer coast. It is possible the species is breeding at other sites, but confirmation of this is lacking because of the difficulty of surveying nesting sites on Washington's outer coast and the difficulty of finding all nests of burrowing species in general. The largest known colony is on Carroll Island where about 1,600 birds are estimated to be nesting in burrows



under grassy slopes. An estimated 1,900 breed on two of the Bodelteh Island group, and about 200 breed on both Alexander and Tatoosh Islands. On the Bodeltehs the birds nest extensively under deciduous shrub cover on north-facing slopes.

HISTORICAL STATUS AND VULNERABILITY

Virtually nothing is known of historical trends in populations of Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels nesting in Washington. Many of the seabird colonies, especially those along the outer coast in particular, have been entered only a few times during the known history of the State (some rocks with nesting colonies apparently have never been landed upon by seabird biologists), and fragmentary reports and casual estimates make meaningful comparisons impossible. However, based on recent field work surveying available habitat, we feel it is unlikely that there could be more than 3,000 additional Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels nesting in Washington.

Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels readily desert their nests if disturbed by humans during incubation or while parents are brooding recently hatched chicks. Evidence from studies of an Alaskan population shows that extremely unfavorable weather conditions or insufficient food supplies will cause parents to temporarily abandon eggs and chicks (Boersma et al. 1980). Such temporary abandonment of nests reduces viability of eggs, causes death among chicks, and lengthens the breeding season (Boersma and Wheelright 1979; Boersma et al. 1980).

These storm-petrels are most vulnerable to oil pollution during the summer months when the birds are distributed close to continents due to breeding activities (Lensink et al. 1978; Weins et al. 1978). They could be severely impacted by pollution of marine food webs at this time when they are "tied" to colony sites, though loss of prey species could have severe effects at other times. They are also vulnerable to predation at colonies by animals like river otters (Lutra candensis) when colonies are close to the mainland (Speich and Pitman 1984).