LAYSAN ALBATROSS *Phoebastria immutabilis*

Conservation Status

ALASKA: High **N. AMERICAN: High Concern** **GLOBAL: Vulnerable**

Breed	Eggs	Incubation	Fledge	Nest	Feeding Behavior	Diet
Nov-July	1	~ 65 d	165 d	ground scrape	surface dip	fish, squid, fish eggs and waste

Life History and Distribution

Laysan Albatrosses *(Phoebastria immutabilis)* breed primarily in the Hawaiian Islands, but they inhabit Alaskan waters during the summer months to feed. They are the most abundant of the three albatross species that visit Alaska.

The albatross has been described as the "true nomad of the oceans." Once fledged, it remains at sea for three to five years before returning to the island where it was born. When birds are eight or nine years old they begin to breed. The breeding season is November to July and the rest of the year, the birds remain at sea. Strong, effortless flight is the key to being able to spend so much time in the air. The albatross takes advantage of air currents just above the ocean's waves to soar in perpetual fluid motion. It may not flap its wings for hours, or even for days. The aerial master never touches land outside the breeding season, but it does rest on the water to feed and sleep. To avoid predators such as whales and sharks, this bird can even sleep while flying.

The Laysan Albatross is a large bird with a wingspan of six feet or more and weighs up to 22 pounds, but that is small for an albatross. The birds' underparts are white and the back and upperwings are uniformly dark. Similar species found in Alaskan waters are the Black-footed Albatross (*Phoebastria nigripes*) and the much rarer, endangered, Short-tailed Albatross (*Phoebastria albatrus).* Hybridizations have been recorded between Laysan and Black-footed Albatrosses. The latter may be distinguished by a uniformly dark brown plumage. The Short-tailed Albatross has all white underwings and back, a yellow wash on the back of the neck, and a larger, heavier bill.

Laysan Albatrosses live from forty to sixty years and are capable of breeding annually. The birds are monogamous and the pair bond is established by an elaborate courtship "dance." Once mated, the bond is only broken by death or disappearance of the mate. They rendezvous each year with their partner at the same location and establish a new nest within a few feet of the original nest site.

In the U.S., Laysan Albatross nesting is limited to islands in the Hawaiian Archipelago. Colonies also exist on the Bonin Islands in Japan and on Guadalupe Island off the coast of Baja California. Between July and November, Laysan Albatrosses disperse widely throughout the North Pacific Ocean and adjoining seas. In Alaska, they are most

commonly seen in the southern Bering Sea, Aleutian Islands, and the northwestern Gulf of Alaska. Nonbreeders may remain in Alaska throughout the year and breeding birds are known to travel from Hawaii to Alaska in search of food for their young. Albatrosses have the ability to concentrate the food they catch and store it in their bellies for the long flight back to their chicks in Hawaii. When the parents arrive back at the nest, they feed the chick by regurgitation.

This species eats mostly fish, fish eggs, and squid often feeding at night when the prey rises to the surface. They also feed on fish waste disposed of by fishing vessels.

Alaska Seasonal Distribution

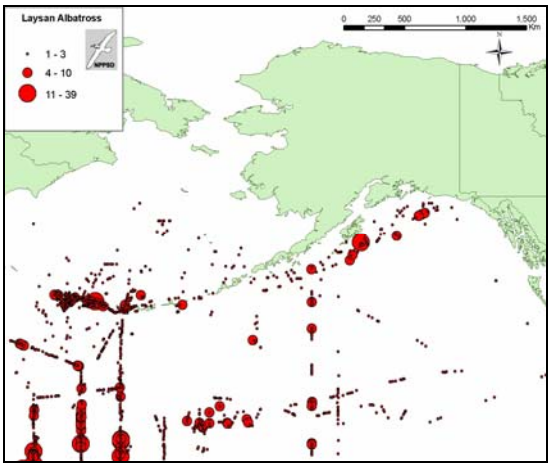
AK Region	Sp	S	F	W
Southeastern	R	+	-	-
Southcoastal	R	R	R	-
Southwestern	U	U	U	R
Central	-	-	-	-
Western	R	R	R	-
Northern	-	-	-	-

C= Common, U= Uncommon, R= Rare, + = Casual or accidental, - = Not known to occur, * = Known or probable breeder, Sp= Mar-May, S= June and July, F= Aug-Nov, W= Dec-Feb.

Population Estimates and Trends

A 2003-2004 population estimate for breeding pairs worldwide was approximately 630,000 pairs. The largest colonies are on Laysan (145,000 pairs) and Midway islands (441,000 pairs).

There is concern that the population may be declining, however, trend data are not available. More rigorous monitoring is needed before trends can be accurately



Distribution of Laysan Albatrosses in Alaska as determined from boat-based surveys conducted between 1974-1988. Seabird distribution maps created from data provided by the North Pacific Pelagic Seabird Database (NPPSD) Version 1.0, 2005. USGS Alaska Science Center & U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, Alaska. http://www.absc.usgs.gov/research/NPPSD

assessed. The breeding range is expanding with small colonies forming on islands off central Mexico and birds are recolonizing Johnston Atoll and Wake Island in the central Pacific Ocean.

Conservation Concerns and Actions

Feather hunting and military developments decimated colonies on some islands earlier this century, but are no longer a threat to the Laysan Albatross. However, the species continues to encounter human caused mortality from a variety of causes.

In 1990, an estimated 17,500 Laysan Albatrosses were killed in high seas driftnets (0.7% of the population). A ban on this fishery in 1993 substantially reduced overall bycatch in the U.S. fisheries. Laysan Albatrosses are also killed as bycatch in longline fisheries. During the 1990s, thousands of Laysan Albatrosses were killed each year in Hawaiian longline fisheries. In Alaskan waters, an estimated 413-508 Laysan Albatrosses were killed per year in the Bering Sea/Aleutian islands demersal groundfish longline fisheries and an estimated 81-127 were killed annually in the Gulf of Alaska. Most of the bycatch occured in the longline fisheries, but the trawl groundfish fishery has occasionally shown relatively high bycatch levels. In the Gulf of Alaska, Bering Sea, and Aleutian Islands combined trawl fisheries, 186-253 Laysan Albatrosses were killed annually between 1998-2003. Alaska and Hawaii represent only a portion of the incidental fishing mortality that occurs in the North Pacific. Bycatch in fisheries conducted in the North Pacific by Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Russia, and China is also a concern.

Collisions with airplanes threaten albatrosses and are a serious threat to humans as well. Between 1954 and 1964, 54,000 birds were killed at Midway Island to reduce the risk of collisions with military aircraft. This problem has diminished in some areas, but continues to remain a problem at the Pacific Missile Range (Kauai), Dillingham Airfield (Oahu) and the Marine Corps Base Hawaii (Oahu). Nesting efforts are thwarted in these areas by egg collection and relocation of adults.

Predation by dogs, cats, and rats *(Rattus spp.)* is still a threat on some Hawaiian Islands. Rats have been eradicated on all Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, but some large islands still have rats. Tiger sharks (*Galeocerdo cuvier)* are also an important predator of albatross chicks. On Midway Island, nearly 10% of the fledglings fall prey to tiger sharks in the waters surrounding the island.

A serious conservation concern is plastics ingestion. If nestlings are fed plastics that parents find at sea (often entangled with food), their food and water intake is reduced. This can potentially cause dehydration, starvation and death of the chicks.

Recommended Management Actions

- Monitor population trends in Alaskan waters.
- Continue monitoring of breeding populations in the Hawaiian Islands.
- Compile, analyze, and report data on Laysan Albatrosses from the North Pacific Pelagic Seabird Database and NOAA Seabird Observer Program to identify summer and fall distribution of the species in Alaskan waters.
- Work with state and federal agencies and fisheries councils to better understand and minimize the impacts of fisheries interactions.
    - Support seabird bycatch reduction workshops for other countries in the North Pacific.
    - Support continued research and development of mitigation measures to prevent seabird bycatch.
- Support efforts to minimize the incidence of fuel spills.

Regional Contact

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References

Armstrong 1995; IUCN Internet Website (2005); Kushlan *et al.* 2002; NOAA Internet Website (2005); U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2006, 2002; Whittow 1993b.

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