



Harbinger of Hope

by Roger Fitzgerald

Speaking of birds—I refer to my earlier grousing about the vanishing wild pheasant (or wild anything)—I heard another report of a short-tailed albatross sighting in the Bering Sea. Here's a bird, *Phoebastria albatrus*, that was declared extinct in 1949, showing up on the fishing grounds in greater numbers—surely a harbinger of good things to come for the fishing industry, to say nothing of the albatross.

And, I might add, all the sweeter because fishermen have taken a proactive role in the bird's recovery. You know about it because you read the *Journal*, but most people don't have a clue. Just not the kind of story the mainstream media picks up on. Bad fish, bad fishing—that seems to be the only beat they know.

But a good story nonetheless: about the breakthrough effort of a group of fishermen—the North Pacific Longline Association—taking the initiative in solving an environmental problem (prompted, I would imagine, by the prospect of having the government do it without them)—and solving it.

It begins in the fall of 1995, when two short-tailed albatross were taken in the Bering Sea on baited hooks—at a time the species was widely regarded as the “most endangered bird species in the world,” estimated population 900.

Led by executive director Thorn Smith, the Longline Association sprang into action. Bird avoidance devices were tested on the grounds voluntarily by fishermen, eventually becoming mandatory—in fact now in use in Canada and countries around the world.

And the work continues. Experiments with internally weighted groundline, for example, getting the

bait past the birds faster while increasing the catch rate—a double whammy if they can perfect it. “A common sense approach to solving conservation problems” Washington Sea Grant (which has worked with the project from the beginning) called it.

And so it is, but ‘common sense’ to solve a problem? What an idea! And it worked—and is working. Since 1998, the longline mortality rate on short-tailed albatross (after millions upon millions of hooks going through the baiter) is zero.

**This is not Georges Bank,
this is the future...
the birthplace of the
environmental fisherman.**

And happily so because the penalty is two birds and the entire fishery (of some 35 vessels) shuts down for the rest of the year. Hook a short-tail and you go down with it.

And that's just the way they want it. Because this is the cleanest, sweetest cod fishery in the world—yes, I say it because this is where I get my home-pack, but it's true. And, for that matter, true of all of Alaska's longline fisheries. This is not Georges Bank, this is the future...the birthplace of the environmental fisherman.

But there's more to the story. The Longline Association and the Marine Conservation Alliance together have funded START (Short-Tailed Albatross Recovery Team), the main purpose of which is to establish two new nesting areas on non-volcanic

islands.

As it is, the last survivors nest on the side of a very active volcano on the island of Torishima off Japan. Scientists are troubled by the location (as if it's up to them where they nest), but clearly it's the volcano that's kept the albatross alive by keeping away the nest robbers. One year when the depredation was so heavy that the world's largest albatross was down to only a few birds, the volcano erupted killing all the islanders (that were robbing their nests), but sparing the albatross.

Now it's the tourists and bird watchers—who would do for the albatross what whale watchers are doing for the whales: killing them with kindness.

In 1954, five years after the short-tailed albatross was declared extinct, a group of Japanese scientists visited the island, discovering 10 breeding pairs on the side of the volcano—the last of millions that were slaughtered over the years by feather merchants and stuffed into pillows or ladies' hats—and thus the albatross went back on the Most Endangered list where it remains today.

Which brings me back to this last sighting in the Bering Sea—specifically the reference to “a flock.” A flock of endangered albatross? The skipper must have peed his pants.

And as it was a longline skipper who made the identification—those boys know their short tails—I have to believe it was accurate. And credible. The population of short-tailed albatross has more than doubled (to 1,900) since the bird regulations went into effect.

Such are the times—and the times are looking brighter. Barring any “eruptions,” we should glide into another good year of fishing (see Council groundfish recommendations p.19), and I would like to think the return of this splendid bird, ineffable flier of the high seas, will bring us good luck in the coming New Year. 