

SHORT-TAILED ALBATROSS

Phoebastria albatrus

Other: Steller Albatross

monotypic

non-breeding visitor, regular, endangered

Until the 19th century Short-tailed Albatross were abundant breeders in various island groups in the western North Pacific Ocean. Between 1885 and 1903, hunters killed an estimated 5 million Short-tailed Albatross on breeding colonies for feathers, food, and fertilizer, destroying all breeding colonies except that on Torishima I, Japan, where they were severely reduced (Austin 1949, Hasegawa and DeGange 1982; USFWS 2005b, 2008). The colony persisted and Japanese scientists led by H. Hasegawa have conducted a comprehensive project to protect the albatross on Torishima, including banding all chicks and reading all bands on adults each year. The population on Torishima has grown steadily and an additional small colony has since become established on Minami-kojima I in the s. Ryuku Is. Torishima's population has grown to 382 pairs in 2007/2008 and is projected to reach 500 pairs by 2020. Adding estimates of non-breeding adults and immature birds roaming at sea results in a population estimate of around 2500 Short-tailed Albatross worldwide by the late 2000s. It was listed as an Endangered Species, excluding North America by mistake in 1969, corrected in Jul 2000 (USFWS 2008a).

When not breeding Short-tailed Albatross range to the Bering Sea and throughout the temperate North Pacific to the coastal waters of N America (Palmer 1962, AOU 1998, CBRC 2007). It was placed in the genus *Diomedea* until the AOU (1997) split the three N Pacific albatross species into *Phoebastria*. At least some early reports of "Short-tailed Albatross" (Peale 1848, Cassin 1858, Dole 1879) and "*D. albatrus (chinensis)*" (Wilson and Evans 1899), including several from the Hawaiian Islands, almost certainly pertain to [Black-footed Albatross](#), at the time confused with immatures of Short-tailed Albatross (Rothschild 1900). Although bones have been found in archaeological sites along the Pacific coast of North America (Howard and Dodson 1933), there is no indication of historical breeding by Short-tailed Albatross anywhere else east of the Izu Is off s. Japan. Short-tailed Albatross normally come to land only when breeding. But in a practice unique to the *Northwestern Hawaiian Islands*, individual Short-tailed Albatross have been landing ashore for more than 70 years (Richardson 1994). No complete specimens have been taken in the Hawaiian Islands, but the birds have been well photographed (see [HRBP](#) file and *E* 41:82, 54:36, 68:32; *AB* 39:212; *NAB* 58:325; etc.).

The first record for Short-tailed Albatross in the Hawaiian Islands was of an individual on Sand I, *Midway* in Dec 1938 or 1939 (Blackman 1944, Bailey 1956) which returned the following year (Hadden 1941), but became injured, died, and was buried that winter. Munro (1944) and Bailey (1956) published the same photograph of this bird, the former suggesting that it might be a [Wandering Albatross](#). In Nov 1940 another immature bird came to Sand Island (*E* 14:32). Thereafter the status of the Short-tailed Albatross on Midway was over-shadowed by World War II and post-war activities, and it is possible that an occasional Short-tailed Albatross might have fallen victim to eradication efforts of [Laysan](#) and [Black-footed](#) albatrosses (Robbins 1966), although there is no direct evidence that this occurred. A second-hand report that a pair of Short-tailed Albatross had nested at Midway and fledged a chick in both 1961 and 1962 (Fisher in Richardson 1994) is unsubstantiated (*E* 56:46-47).

From 1965 through 2009 at least 16 different individuals have been recorded on Midway (e.g., Sanger 1972; Sekora 1977a, 1977b; Grant and Pettit 1981, Rauzon 2001; *E*

34:15-16, 60:83; [HRBP](#) file), including several banded individuals from Torishima that returned for multiple years: 1973-1983 (hatched 1964; [HRBP](#) 0012-0014, 0031, 0140, 1278, 5568, 5570), 1984-1994 (hatched 1979; [HRBP](#) 0444-0445, 0490, 0558, 0734-0735, 0898), 1989-2003 (hatched 1982; [HRBP](#) 0899-0901, 1244, 1398), 1994-2000 (hatched 1988), and 1996-2004 (hatched 1987). The individual that returned from 1989-2003 was a female that laid infertile eggs in Nov 1993, 1995, 1997, and 2001; in 1995 it incubated the egg constantly for 62 days before giving up and returning to sea, perhaps a record for a bird known to go without food. One of the infertile eggs was collected 9 Dec 1993 and preserved (BPBM 179736). Occasionally this and other Short-tailed Albatrosses have been observed in some courtship activity with [Black-footed](#) or [Laysan](#) albatrosses (*cf.* Grant and Pettit 1981, [HRBP](#) 0140), but these episodes have been short-lived. In March 1994 a pair of Short-taileds was seen together consistently and courtship dancing was observed (Richardson 1994). The male returned briefly during fall 1994 but was not seen again. On 19 Nov 1999 USFWS staff moved a male several hundred meters from his territory to the female that had been laying infertile eggs. They engaged in some courtship dancing, but by day's end the female had flown to sea and they subsequently both returned to their separate territories (Rauzon 2001).

In Oct 2000 a project was established on Eastern I by the USFWS to attract Short-tailed Albatross to breed on Midway using decoys and acoustic broadcasts of breeding vocalizations (USFWS 2008). The site was chosen based on a territory of a returning adult. Through the 2000s at least five separate Short-tailed Albatrosses had been attracted to the decoy site (e.g., [HRBP](#) 5063, 5724-5725, published *NAB* 58:325), including an adult and two subadults that have been observed courting in various combinations during 2004-2009, and up to four birds recorded at once at the atoll in Dec 2008. In 2009 an adult male (banded as a chick in 1987) and a subadult-plumaged female (banded as a chick in 2003), which had been seen courting off and on for three years, constructed a nest ([HRBP](#) 5724-5725) but had laid no egg by 1 Dec.

Elsewhere in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, one unbanded Short-tailed Albatross was present at Tern Island, *French Frigate*, from Nov 1975 to Feb 1976 (Sekora 1977a), and another in 3rd or 4th basic plumage appeared for 1-3 days in Jan of 1980 ([HRBP](#) 0141), returning Jan 1981 and Jan 1982. An unbanded "immature" Short-tailed Albatross that landed exhausted on *Laysan* on 28 Mar 1976 was possibly the former of these French Frigate individuals (Zeillemaker 1976); individuals or a single returning individual were observed on Laysan in Apr 2006 ([HRBP](#) 5569), 9 Nov 2007-Feb 2008, and 8 Nov 2008-Mar 2009. A 5-year old banded bird appeared at Tern Island 13 Feb 1994 and was then observed at *Kure* 24 Mar 1994. This individual had been observed on Torishima 26-29 Nov 1993, barely 75 days before visiting Tern Island and Kure (Hasegawa 1994, *AB* 48:251). One subadult Short-tailed Albatross was observed flying offshore within 1 mi of Southeast Island, *Pearl & Hermes* 22 April 2004.

The only records from the *Southeastern Hawaiian Islands* involve subadults on *Kaua'i*, among [Laysan Albatrosses](#) at Pacific Missile Range Facility 28 Mar 2000 and flying over Kilauea Point NWR 4 Mar 2006. No Short-tailed Albatrosses have yet been reported from Hawaiian waters by researchers *at sea*.

[Acronyms and Abbreviations](#) [Literature cited](#)

Citation: Pyle, R.L., and P. Pyle. 2009. The Birds of the Hawaiian Islands: Occurrence, History, Distribution, and Status. B.P. Bishop Museum, Honolulu, HI, U.S.A. Version 1 (31 December 2009) <http://hbs.bishopmuseum.org/birds/rlp-monograph/>