

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, Piatt et al. 2006). The colony persisted and Japanese scientists, initially led by H. Hasegawa, have conducted a comprehensive project to protect the albatross on Torishima, including banding chicks and reading bands on adults. The population on Torishima has grown steadily and through the mid-2010s additional colonies were discovered or established in the Senkaku, Ryuku, and Ogasawara Is (USFWS 2014 Deguchi et al. 2016). By 2014 Torishima's population had grown to about 800 pairs and is projected to reach 1000 pairs by 2017 (USFWS 2008a, 2014; BLI 2016). Adding estimates from other colonies and of non-breeding adults and immature birds roaming at sea results in a population estimates of >4000 Short-tailed Albatrosses by the mid 2010s. 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, Piatt et al. 2006, CBRC 2007, Suryan et al. 2007, USFWS 2014). It was listed as an Endangered Species, excluding North America by mistake in 1969, corrected in Jul 2000 (USFWS 2008a).

The Short-tailed Albatross 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 or prospecting for breeding.

In the *Northwestern Hawaiian Islands*, individual Short-tailed Albatross have been landing ashore for more than 70 years (Richardson 1994), and breeding was first documented on Kure and Midway atolls in 2010-2011 (see below). A specimen of an upper mandible, of unknown date and locality within Hawaii (YPM 111056; [HRBP](#) 6049) was possibly from Midway in the 1950s; two additional specimens have been collected from Midway (see below), and the species has been abundantly photographed throughout the Northwestern Islands (see [HRBP](#) page and *E* 41:82, 54:36, 68:32; *AB* 39:212; *NAB* 58:325; etc.). As the Japan population increased through the early 2010s, so did the visitation rates of younger birds to the Northwest Hawaiian Islands (e.g. [HRBP](#) 5062, 5569, 6050, 6051, 6054-6056, 6058), giving hope for more breeding by Short-tailed Albatrosses in these islands in the future; for example, a high count of 11 separate individuals overall was documented in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands during the winter of 2011-2012 (*NAB* 66:370).

The first record for Short-tailed Albatross in the Hawaiian Islands was of a 3rd/4th-cycle 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 young 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 2016 at least 21 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 its 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-tailed Albatrosses 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 early 2010s at least seven separate Short-tailed Albatrosses had been attracted to the decoy site (e.g., [HRBP](#) 5063, 5724-5725 published *NAB* 58:325, 6058), including an adult and two subadults courting during 2004-2009 that, along with a bird on Sand I, represented a high count of four birds recorded at once at Midway 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) constructed a nest but did not lay an egg ([HRBP](#) 5724-5725). The following season this pair returned and laid an egg in Nov 2010 which hatched in Jan 2011, survived a large storm in Feb and a tsunami in Mar (see [Laysan Albatross](#)), and fledged 16 Jun 2011 (*E* 72:25; [HRBP](#) 6057), the first known nesting of this species away from Japan. This pair raised additional chicks during the 2011-2012 ([HRBP](#) 6059, 6060 published *NAB* 66:747; fledging around 10 Jun 2012) and 2013-2014 (chick near fledging on 31 May 2014) seasons but not during other seasons through 2016. An adult male (unbanded and not the previously breeding male) was found dead at the decoy site 13 Dec 2014 ([HRBP](#) 6062, BPBM 186122).

On *Kure*, the first record of a Short-tailed Albatross was on 24 Mar 1994, a banded individual that had been observed on Torishima 26-29 Nov 1993, barely 75 days before visiting Tern Island (see below) and then Kure (Hasegawa 1994, *AB* 48:251). A 5th/6th/7th-cycle individual was photographed on Kure 10 Nov 2007 ([HRBP 6051](#)). On 2-3 Nov 2010, two banded adults from Torishima (age 17 and 10 years) were observed on Kure laying two eggs in a nest ([HRBP 6052](#)), both of which were abandoned by 27 Dec and were infertile (egg fragments sent to BPBM, 185624). As adults can only lay one egg per year it was widely speculated that both adults were females. They were not observed during the 2010-2011 season (DOFAW 2012) but both individuals returned and laid two eggs (that did not hatch) during each of the 2012-2016 seasons ([HRBP 6061](#)), and these were joined by other banded birds 23 Jan-23 Mar 2012 ([HRBP 6054](#); age 7 yrs) and 24 Jan 2015 (age 2 yrs). In Oct 2014 decoys were installed to help encourage continued breeding.

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), another in 3rd or 4th basic plumage appeared for 1-3 days in Jan of 1980 ([HRBP 0141](#)), returning Jan 1981 and Jan 1982, a five-yr-old banded bird observed 13-14 Feb 1994 was later observed on Kure (see above), one was reported 19 Feb into Apr 2002, and a bird in predefinitive plumage was photographed 31 Jan 2011 ([HRBP 6055-6056](#)). 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); additional individuals or a single returning individual were observed on Laysan in Apr 2006 ([HRBP 5569, 6050](#)) and during Nov-Mar each year during 2007-2015 ([HRBP 6053](#)). One subadult Short-tailed Albatross was observed flying offshore within 1 mi of Southeast Island, *Pearl & Hermes* 22 April 2004.

The only records of Short-tailed Albatrosses from the *Southeastern Hawaiian Islands* involve predefinitive birds 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](#)

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