

THE STATE OF OUR SEABIRDS



Laysan (left) and Black-footed (right) Albatrosses nest side-by-side on Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge: Mary Hughes.

In 2002, American Bird Conservancy produced the report, *Sudden Death on the High Seas: Longline Fishing, a Global Catastrophe*. The report detailed the tremendous impact that longlining was having on albatross and some other seabird populations, and outlined simple, proven measures that could help reverse the situation. For this magazine, we take a look at longline fishing today to see how things have changed in the six years since our report, and what progress has been made.

Seabirds and fishermen are both after the same thing – fish – so wherever you find fishing boats on the open ocean, albatrosses, petrels, and other “pelagic” seabirds (those that spend most of their lives far out to sea) are never far away. The birds congregate around a boat and wait patiently. At some point, fish, squid, and other enticing fare will drop from the stern into the water, and for a moment will float tantalizingly on the surface. For the birds, it’s a bonanza of free food that they can’t resist. What they don’t know, however, is that each morsel is actually bait that is pierced through with a large metal hook attached to a longline that can be many miles in length. The easy meal quickly turns into a death sentence for any bird unfortunate enough to

take the bait. The bird is impaled by the hook and dragged under to drown. So why don’t the birds learn that the free fish is a death trap? Fishermen also dispose of fish waste (offal) over the sides of their boats, and this food carries no fatal consequences. For the birds, it’s a game of Russian roulette.

Longline fishing has been responsible for disastrous declines in populations of seabirds around the world over the last 30 years or so, and this continues today. Largely because of longlining, 18 out of 22 species of albatrosses are now considered threatened with extinction (Vulnerable, Endangered, or Critically Endangered) under IUCN-World Conservation Union criteria. This is up from 16* in 2002. Fourteen are considered to be declining, two have unknown trends, and five are “stable”, which leaves just one albatross species in the world, the federally endangered Short-tailed Albatross, that is considered to be increasing.

There have, however, been some improvements in the last six years, most notably in the United States. In our 2002 report, ABC noted the high number of seabirds that were being killed in the Alaskan and Hawaiian longline fisheries. An estimated 20,000 seabirds were killed each year in

Black-browed Albatross: ClipArt.com



Black-footed Albatross: ClipArt.com



Shy Albatross: Mike Double



Wandering Albatross: Mark Jobling/wikipedia.com

Change in IUCN Red List Status of Albatross Species, 2002-2008

Species	Status 2008	Status 2002	Trend 2008
Amsterdam Albatross	CR	CR	Declining
Antipodean Albatross	VU	VU	Unknown
Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross	EN	NT	Declining
Black-browed Albatross	EN	VU	Declining
Black-footed Albatross	EN	VU	Declining
Buller's Albatross	VU	VU	Stable
Campbell Albatross	VU	VU	Stable
Chatham Albatross	CR	CR	Stable
Grey-headed Albatross	VU	VU	Declining
Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross	EN	VU	Declining
Laysan Albatross	VU	LC	Declining
Light-mantled Albatross	NT	NT	Declining
Northern Royal Albatross	EN	EN	Declining
Salvin's Albatross	VU	VU	Stable
Short-tailed Albatross	VU	VU	Increasing
Shy Albatross	NT	NT	Unknown
Sooty Albatross	EN	VU	Declining
Southern Royal Albatross	VU	VU	Stable
Tristan Albatross	EN	EN	Declining
Wandering Albatross	VU	VU	Declining
Waved Albatross	CR	VU	Declining
White-capped Albatross	NT	*	Declining

Red indicates a negative change in status from 2002 to 2008.

*White-capped and Shy Albatrosses were formerly considered the same species but later split, so the total number of albatross species has increased from 21 to 22.

Alaskan waters, including Black-footed, Laysan, and Short-tailed Albatrosses. On average 1,051 albatrosses were caught each year between 1993 and 2000 in that fishery. Similar figures were reported in Hawaiian waters, which averaged 2,377 albatrosses killed each year in 1999 and 2000.

Today the picture looks very different. In 2006, only 88 albatrosses (15 Laysan and 73 Black-footed) were killed off the Hawaiian Islands, and 291 (57 Laysan and 134 Black-footed) off Alaska. Between 2002 and 2006, the average annual albatross toll decreased to 185 and 136 for Alaska and Hawaii respectively—a reduction of 82% for Alaska and 94% for Hawaii; this despite a near doubling of the number of hooks set in Hawaii.

The reason behind these dramatic bycatch decreases is the mitigation measures that ABC advocated for, and that it promoted in its 2002 seabird report. The pressure from

ABC and other groups paid off, and in 2004, the federal government required all U.S. longline vessels over 55 feet long fishing in Alaskan waters to use paired streamer lines that keep birds away from baited hooks. Smaller vessels must use at least a single streamer line. In anticipation of the regulations, many boats began voluntarily using the streamers ahead of the mandatory deadline, and immediately, their benefit was felt. The government complimented these regulations with a streamer line giveaway program that has so far provided more than 5,000 free lines. Cumulatively, these lines alone have been credited with reducing overall seabird bycatch in Alaska by nearly 70%.

In Hawaii, albatrosses received a reprieve when the swordfish fishery was closed in 2000 due to excessive bycatch of turtles. The fishery was reopened in 2004, but, along with all other Hawaiian longline fisheries, now mandates strict mitigation measures for the avoidance of seabird bycatch,

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