Short-tailed Albatross

Phoebastria albatrus

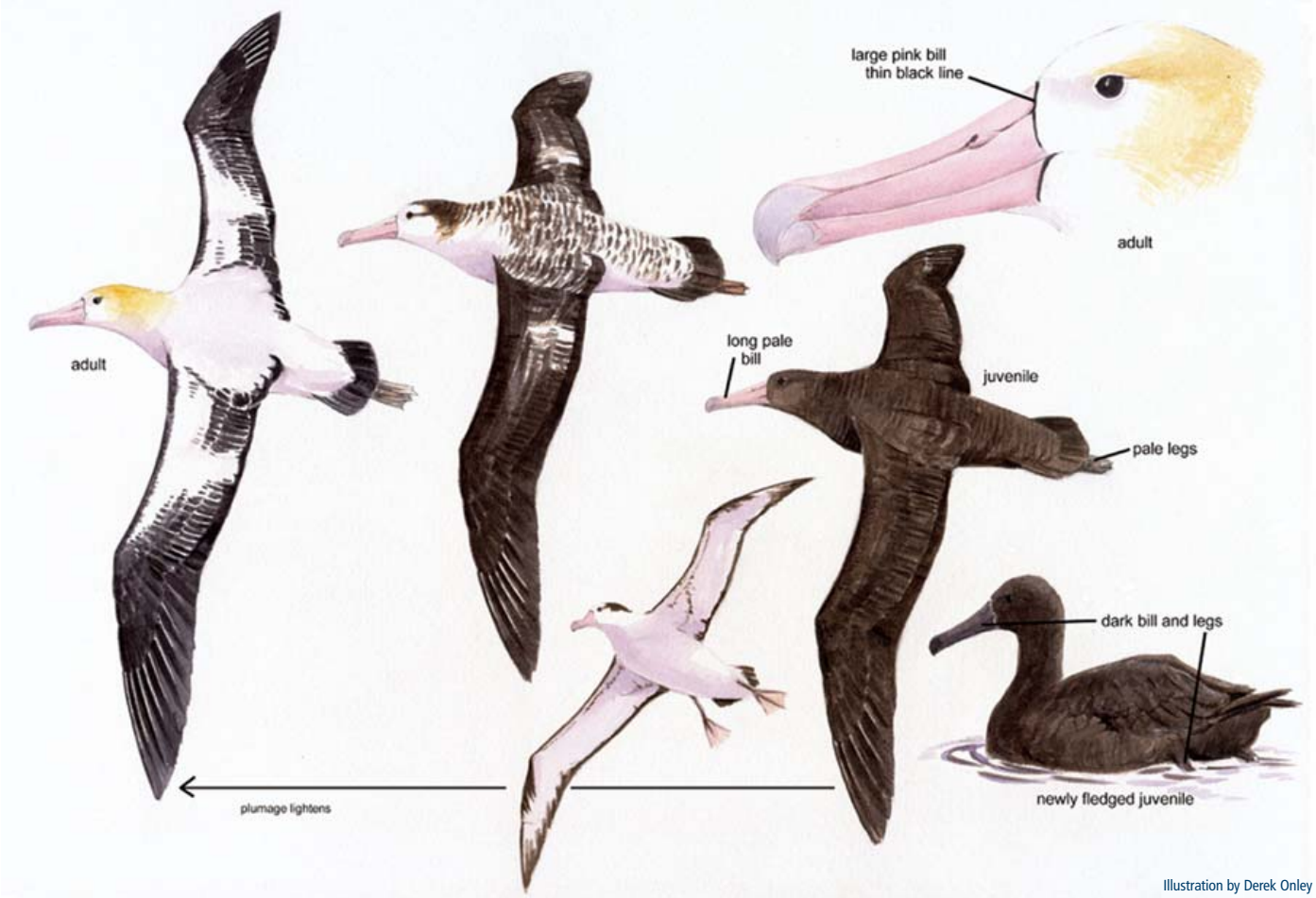


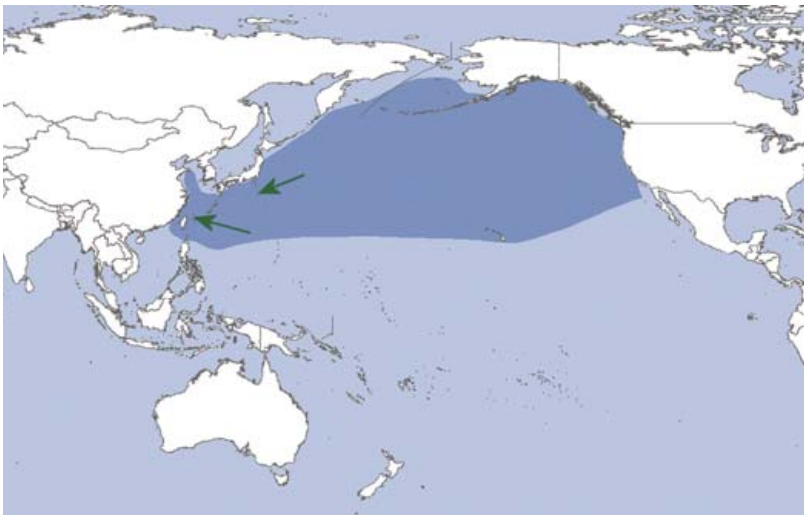
Illustration by Derek Onley

IUCN THREAT STATUS: Vulnerable, population increasing

Identification:

WINGSPAN: 210 cm LENGTH: 89 cm BILL: 120-130 mm

Medium-sized albatross. Juveniles are entirely brownish-black and become whiter over many years resulting in a wide range of plumages. Dark young birds can be told from similar Black-footed Albatross by pink bill except for newly-fledged juveniles which have dark grey bills. Look for dark feathers at base of bill, long bill and differently shaped head and bill. Older whiter birds are never as neatly black and white as Laysan Albatross: dark-winged birds have patchy brown heads and white-headed birds patchy black and white wings. Check also southern hemisphere Wandering, Tristan, Antipodes and Amsterdam Albatrosses – just in case!



Range and Population:

The short-tailed albatross breeds on Torishima and the Senkaku Islands, Japan. It historically bred on several additional Japanese islands and islands off Taiwan[1]. Its marine range covers most of the northern Pacific Ocean and there are some records in the Sea of Okhotsk, but it has not recently been found in the Sea of Japan. Outside the breeding season, it has been recorded along the coasts of eastern Russia, South Korea, China and Taiwan, and Alaska and the Hawaiian Islands, USA. It declined dramatically during the 19th and 20th centuries and was believed extinct by the 1940s, until its rediscovery in the 1950s[3]. The current population is estimated at c.1,200 individuals[2], with slightly more than 1,000 birds on Torishima and 100–150 birds estimated on Minamijima.

Ecology:

For nesting, it seems to prefer level, open areas by steep cliffs, adjacent to tall clumps of the grass *Miscanthus sinensis*. It feeds mainly on squid and has been recorded following ships to feed on scraps and fish offal.

Threats:

Its historical decline was caused by exploitation. Today, the key threats are mortality caused by fisheries and the instability of soil on its main breeding site. With the majority of the population breeding at a single site, it is vulnerable to natural disasters, such as volcanic eruptions. Introduced predators are a potential threat.

Conservation:

CITES Appendix I. CMS Appendix I. It is legally protected in Japan and the USA. Torishima has been established as a National Wildlife Protection Area. In 1981–1982, native plants were transplanted into the Torishima nesting colony, in order to stabilise the nesting habitat and the nest structures. This has enhanced breeding success, with over 60% of eggs now resulting in fledged young. Decoys have been used to attract birds to nest at another site on Torishima and the first pair started breeding at this new site in November 1995. Almost all birds on Torishima are banded.

Targets:

Promote measures designed to protect this species from entanglement in fishing nets and prevent mortality from longline fisheries. Study the possibility of attracting it to breed at former colonies. Promote conservation measures for the population in the Senkaku Islands.

References:

1. H. Hasegawa (1979). **2.** H. Hasegawa (1997). **3.** W.L. N. Tickell (1973).