

Grey-headed Albatross



Agreement on the Conservation
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Artwork by Virginia Potter Vredevelde from a photograph by Michelle Risi

THE GREY-HEADED ALBATROSS is one of 11 'mollymawk' albatrosses in the genus *Thalassarche* that breed on sub-Antarctic islands. The species has a circumpolar at-sea distribution in the Southern Ocean with breeding occurring in the South Atlantic and southern Indian and Pacific on Australian, Chilean, French, New Zealand and South African islands, as well as on disputed territory in the South Atlantic. Unlike the congeneric Black-browed Albatross, which it breeds alongside at a number of localities, the Grey-headed Albatross tends to avoid continental shelves and forages in deeper waters far from land, feeding on fish and squid by surface seizing.



The Grey-headed Albatross is one of four mollymawk species with distinctive yellow stripes on its otherwise black bill in adult plumage. Unlike the two yellow-nosed albatrosses which only have yellow on the upper mandibles (and less grey on the head and neck), Grey-heads have stripes on both mandibles, similar to the slightly smaller Buller's Albatross – which has a much smaller breeding range, restricted to New Zealand and staying within the Pacific sector of the Southern Ocean.

Unusually for the mollymawk group, Grey-headed Albatrosses are biennial, breeding only every second year if successful. The annual breeding population is of the order of a hundred thousand pairs. Most birds (around half) breed on islands in the South Atlantic. Numbers have decreased at most breeding localities where monitoring occurs, leading to a global category of threat of Endangered. The species is one of the best known with detailed studies undertaken by several countries at a different breeding sites, including satellite tracking of birds at sea, sometimes able to be followed online in near real time by albatross researchers and lovers alike.

The main threat, as for the whole albatross family, comes from at-sea mortality caused by fisheries, especially longlining for tuna and toothfish. Mitigation measures have been developed, such as using bird-scaring lines, line weighting and night setting. It is now necessary to see these enforced on the High Seas. Additionally, introduced House Mice have taken to attacking Grey-headed Albatross chicks on South Africa's Marion Island, reducing breeding success. An eradication exercise has been proposed - and funds are being raised towards it by an NGO (<https://mousefreemarion.org/>) - but it remains uncertain when it might take place.

Sources:

ACAP 2012. Grey-headed Albatross *Thalassarche chrysostoma*; <https://acap.aq/en/acap-species>

BirdLife International 2020. Species factsheet: *Thalassarche chrysostoma*; <http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/grey-headed-albatross-thalassarche-chrysostoma>

John Cooper, ACAP Information Officer, 24 January 2020