

# Laysan Albatross



Agreement on the Conservation  
of Albatrosses and Petrels  
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Artwork by *Mary Ann Stafford*



THE LAYSAN ALBATROSS is one of four species in the genus *Phoebastria* that inhabit the Pacific Ocean; the others are the Black-footed, Short-tailed and Waved. The group's range extends from Ecuador's Galapagos Islands on the Equator (where the Waved Albatross breeds) to islands south of Japan, home of the Short-tailed. Laysan (by

far the most abundant of the four species) and Black-footed albatrosses tend to breed together, with the highest numbers on the USA's North-western Hawaiian Islands.

Like most of the world's albatrosses, Laysans are essentially monochrome (white and greyish black) in appearance, but with a pink bill. The juvenile has much the same plumage as the adult – hence the specific scientific name of *immutabilis*. The breeding range, although geographically large, is restricted to 16 sites on the USA's Hawaiian Islands with small populations on islands off Japan and Mexico. At sea it feeds primarily on squid, but also flying fish eggs, fish and crustaceans obtained by surface seizing. It also scavenges from fishing vessels and unfortunately also swallows pieces of floating plastic which can accumulate in chicks' stomachs.

The population has been estimated to be over 800 000 annually breeding pairs, equivalent to c. 1600 000 mature individuals. The North-western Hawaiian Islands of Midway, Laysan and French Frigate Shoals support 90% of the total breeding population. In the past feather hunters and egg collectors near wiped out some populations but the breeding sites are now mostly well protected, allowing partial recovery to the current numbers.

Because of its very large breeding population and numbers of breeding localities, this species is categorized only as globally Near Threatened. However, it faces threats from longline fishing when birds seize baited hooks and drown as the weight of the sinking line pulls them below the sea surface. Mitigation measures have been developed to reduce such mortality, but it remains a challenge to get all fishing vessels to adopt them – especially on the High Seas. Attacks by introduced House Mice is a recent problem on Midway – which supports the largest population by far. However, it is intended to eradicate the mice during 2020. Free-ranging dogs and feral cats remain a problem at some inhabited sites

As for the Black-footed Albatross with which it shares most of its breeding sites, sea-level rise and increased incidence of storm surges thought to be due to climate change are predicted to lead to loss of breeding habitat on the low-lying Hawaiian atolls. As a consequence of this, efforts are being made by a Hawaii NGO, Pacific Rim Conservation, to create a new colony for both species on the Hawaiian island of Oahu by hand-rearing translocated chicks in the expectation they will return as adults to breed at a safe site away from the sea's edge.

**Sources:**

ACAP 2012 Laysan Albatross *Phoebastria immutabilis*; <https://www.acap.aq/en/acap-species>

BirdLife International 2020. Species factsheet: *Phoebastria immutabilis*;  
<http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/laysan-albatross-phoebastria-immutabilis/text>

*John Cooper, ACAP Information Officer, 31 January 2020*