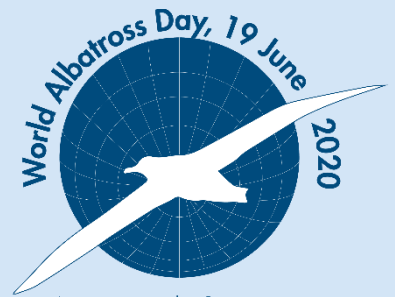


White-capped Albatross



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Artwork by **Shary Page Weckwerth** from a photograph by Laurie Smaglick Johnson

One of the 11 “mollymawk” albatrosses of the Southern Ocean, the WHITE-CAPPED ALBATROSS forms a ‘sister’ group with three closely related ‘shy-type’ species: Chatham, Salvin’s and Shy. The White-capped Albatross is endemic to New Zealand, breeding in the subantarctic Antipodes and Auckland Island groups. The total population has been given as approximately 100,000 breeding pairs according to surveys conducted in 2014, with the far larger part (95%) of the population

breeding on Disappointment Island in the Auckland Island group. However, because it is thought individual birds breed only every second year, the total adult population could approach twice this figure. The population trend is not well known and may be stable (with fluctuations between years); the species is categorised as Near Threatened. The White-capped Albatross lays a single white egg in vegetated cliff colonies; partners share incubation and brooding, with both feeding the chick until fledging.



Based on tracking studies, band recoveries and bycatch specimens, immature and non-breeding White-capped Albatrosses occur at sea throughout the South Atlantic and south-west Indian Ocean, including around the west coast of southern Africa where they overlap with immature Shy Albatrosses. Breeding adults forage in New Zealand and Tasmanian waters. Diet is mainly fish and squid obtained by surface seizing and shallow surface dives, as well as by scavenging from fishing vessels.

As for other 'shy-type' mollymawks, they are essentially grey-black and white birds, with a largely white underwing with a black 'thumb print' against the body. The head is greyish. The bill is pale grey-green with a yellow upper ridge and a brighter yellow tip. Separating the White-capped from the closely related but slightly larger Shy Albatross from Australia, once considered to be a single species, is not easy without a DNA analysis.

Bycatch by both longline and trawl fisheries remains a threat throughout its at-sea range, including in waters around New Zealand, southern Africa and South America off Uruguay, where adoption of mitigation measures (such as deploying bird-scaring lines) has reduced but not eliminated mortality rates. On the main Auckland Island both feral cats and pigs have affected the breeding population; preliminary research towards eradicating these two introduced predators has been undertaken. Thankfully, Disappointment Island (and the other breeding islands) are free of such pests. All the breeding islands are nature reserves within the New Zealand Sub-Antarctic Islands World Heritage Site. The Auckland Islands - Motu Maha Marine Reserve extends out to 12 nautical miles.

Sources:

ACAP 2012. White-capped Albatross *Thalassarche steadi*; <https://www.acap.aq/en/acap-species>

BirdLife International 2020. Species factsheet: *Thalassarche steadi*; <http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/white-capped-albatross-thalassarche-steadii/text>

John Cooper, ACAP Information Officer, 13 October 2020