U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Making More Shorties

Recovering Short-tailed Albatross through Translocation of Chicks

When Alaska longliners brought aboard a couple dead short-tailed albatross in 1998, no one would have guessed that this would be the best thing to ever happen for short-tailed albatross recovery. But like Spock said in the Wrath of Kahn "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few". Those two short-tailed albatross killed on fishing gear during the same week in September '98 set off a chain of events that kick-started the entire short-tailed albatross recovery effort.

The Alaska fishing industry, fearing public outcry and fishery closures in the wake of their short-tail harvest, pushed hard for regulations requiring the use of streamer lines. They also pushed for funding for short-tailed albatross recovery. They were successful on both counts.

Today, we enjoy drastically reduced rates of seabird bycatch and are in the midst of an exciting experiment in endangered species recovery. In 2008, 10 short-tailed albatross chicks were boxed up and moved from their main colony, Torishima to an island 250 miles to the south, called Mukojima. Both Islands are in Japan, but Torishima is an active volcano that has killed people and destroyed albatross habitat more than once in the past hundred years. Nearly all of the remaining short-tailed albatross live here, at great risk. Establishing a new colony on a non-volcanic island is the number one recovery priority for this species, according to the international Short-tailed Albatross Recovery Team.

The short-tailed albatross is the largest and least numerous seabird in the North Pacific. Its wingspan can reach over 2.1 meters (7 feet). It is best distinguished by its large, bubblegum pink bill, with its blue tip and external tubular nostrils. Young birds are dark chocolate brown, gradually turning white as they grow older.
Photo by Hiroshi Hasegawa.

A short-tailed albatross chick is boxed up for transport from Torishima to Mukojima island, Japan. Torishima's active volcano is a threat to the survival of these birds. Mukojima will provide safer habitat for population growth.

Ten short-tailed albatross chicks make their way from the Torishima colony to the helicopter that will carry them to their new home on Mukojima Island.

PROJECT FUNDING

Funding for short-tailed albatross recovery is currently adequate for one additional year of translocation in 2009. It costs about $300,000 per year to move the chicks and to hand-rear them for three months until they can fly off to sea. The Recovery Team says that we need to do this for an additional three years to help assure the successful establishment of a new colony at this "safe" site. Our success at creating a new colony is off to a great start. In our first year, we successfully raised all 10 chicks to fledging, which is higher than the natural survival rate for chicks reared by their parents.

In Japan, our partner for accomplishing this work is the Yamashina institute. Their efforts

received tremendous coverage by the Japanese press during the first year of translocation. So much so, that a Japanese media company, Asahi News, paid all helicopter expenses associated with chick transport. Sapporro Beer Company also contributed funding to the effort. To date, the story has been covered over 30 times in the Japanese media, including several television spots and a documentary.

TIMELINE FOR SUCCESS

A short-tailed albatross takes 5 years to reach sexual maturity and return to breed. During that time, it spends most of it's life searching for food in the same places that fishermen search for fish in Alaska. But because fishermen have become so adept at not catching albatross on their gear, we have high hopes that most of these birds will return to their new home at age 5 and establish the core of a new short-tailed albatross colony, a colony that will one day allow us to remove this species from the endangered species list.

Our population modeling indicates that, if we can continue to translocate these birds for 5 years total, we can likely delist the bids in the year 2033.

The Japanese press corps covers the capture and transport of short-tailed albatross chicks from Torishima to Mukojima. The story has received outstanding coverage in the print and television markets throughout Japan.

The helicopter sponsored by Asahi News carries 10 short-tailed albatross chicks to their new home in February, 2008.

Japanese veterinarian Yuki Watanabe introduces a young short-tailed albatross chick to it's new home, and hopefully, it's new colony, on Mukojima Island, Japan. Decoys of adults in the background are meant to attract other albatross that wander past the island and to help the chicks feel at-home.

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Lead office for short-tailed albatross, Aleutian shield-fern, Kittlitz's murrelet, and Southwest Alaska population of Northern sea otter. Project review for western and south-central Alaska, Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea.

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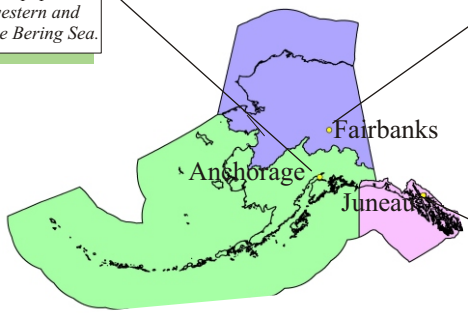

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Status review for old-growth forest species in southeast Alaska.
Project review for southeast Alaska.

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October 2004