

Albatross (Wandering)



Wandering albatross:

Diomedea exulans

Distribution:

The southern oceans and its small islands. Between Antarctica and the Tropic of Capricorn.

Habitat:

Oceans and remote islands.

Description:

Goose-sized with long, narrow wings. Black and white plumage. Long, hooked bill; large webbed feet.

Size:

Length:- 1.1 - 1.35m. Wingspan:- max. 3.6m. Weight:- 8 - 12kg; female lighter.

Life-span:

Up to 80 years

Food:

Mainly squid, octopus, cuttlefish and crustaceans.

The wandering albatross has the largest wingspan of any bird and is perhaps the most magnificent of all twelve species of albatross. It is aptly named as it is a great traveller, covering enormous distances, gliding effortlessly on updraughts. It sometimes spends several months in the air, without ever touching land.

Flying and feeding

The wandering albatross has a huge home range consisting of the 77 million square kilometres of the southern oceans. It can circle the world from the Tropics to Antarctica! Although an albatross often has difficulty in taking off, especially if there is no wind to help it, once airborne it can fly for long periods. The bird glides down towards the sea on folded wings and, when just above the water, it swings sharply into the wind and is blown back up to its original height by the rising air. In this way, the bird progresses in a series of zig-zags. If there are no air currents, the albatross will land on the sea.

The albatross usually feeds far out at sea, alone or in groups. It swoops down to land on the surface and catches its main prey - octopus, squid and cuttlefish - with its large bill, which can be as much as 18cm in length. Sometimes shallow dives are made to catch fish and other creatures below the surface. Albatrosses seem to like refuse from ships too, flopping down into the water and sometimes following a ship for days, waiting for scraps to be thrown overboard.

Breeding

The albatross is a very long-lived bird but it does not start breeding until it is at least seven years old. The breeding grounds are usually on the top of cliffs where the birds can take off easily in the prevailing winds. The birds gather in large numbers and the males and females perform elaborate and spectacular courtship displays. The two birds of a pair dance awkwardly around each other, bowing and clattering their bills, with the wings outstretched. At the end of the performance they point their bills to the sky and scream loudly.

At the beginning of the breeding season, which lasts from November until July, several males may be seen dancing around one female. Once a bird has found a suitable mate, which may take a few years, they remain together until one of them dies.

A large, untidy nest is built by both birds, using soil and vegetation to make a cup-shaped mound about 1 metre across and 30cm high. A single egg is laid, white with red spots, and the parents share the incubation, the male doing most of the sitting. The pair usually change over every two to three weeks and lose quite a lot of body weight during each shift. The chick hatches after about 78 days, which includes three days for the chick to break out of the shell.

The parents brood their chick for a short time and it is fed daily for the first 20 days with regurgitated squid etc. Then the parents leave their offspring alone while they go out to sea and return every 10 days or so to feed it with huge meals. At this stage, the chick may be vulnerable to predators such as skuas, who will eat both eggs and chicks if left unguarded. The large, fluffy white chick continues to sit in its nest and is fed throughout the whole of the severe southern winter, until the following summer - a period of nearly nine months. As a result, the parents can only breed every other year. Eventually the young albatross launches itself into the wind and glides away over the ocean. It may circle the globe many times before returning to the breeding ground to look for a mate.

The wandering Albatross and Man

Sailors gave the albatross its name. The name is taken from a Portuguese word "alcatraz" originally meaning any large seabird. Over the years many less complimentary names have been given to albatrosses, all of them suggesting stupidity. These names include "mollymawk", (from the dutch word meaning "stupid gull")

and "gooney"(derived from the old English "gooney"used to describe a stupid person).

This reputation for stupidity probably resulted from the fact that the albatross is very clumsy on land. It waddles awkwardly, often tripping over its own feet! Landing can be difficult too; quite often a bird crash lands into the breeding colony, sometimes turning several somersaults!

Sailors also used to regard the albatross as a harbinger of wind and storms, possibly because it has difficulty in flying during very calm weather. They also thought an albatross was a reincarnation of a sailor washed overboard, and it was thought very unlucky to kill one.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, however, most species of albatross were sought after for the fashion trade, and thousands were killed for their feathers. These were used by the millinery trade for decorating hats - sometimes whole wings were used for this purpose. The feathers were also used for stuffing mattresses and pillows, though it was called "swans' down"at the time. Fortunately, the fashion for wearing birds' feathers died out before the albatrosses became too seriously threatened.

Today the main threat to the future of the albatross is oil and chemical pollution of the sea. There may be more competition for food too if fishing increases in the southern oceans.

