

Photo Salon

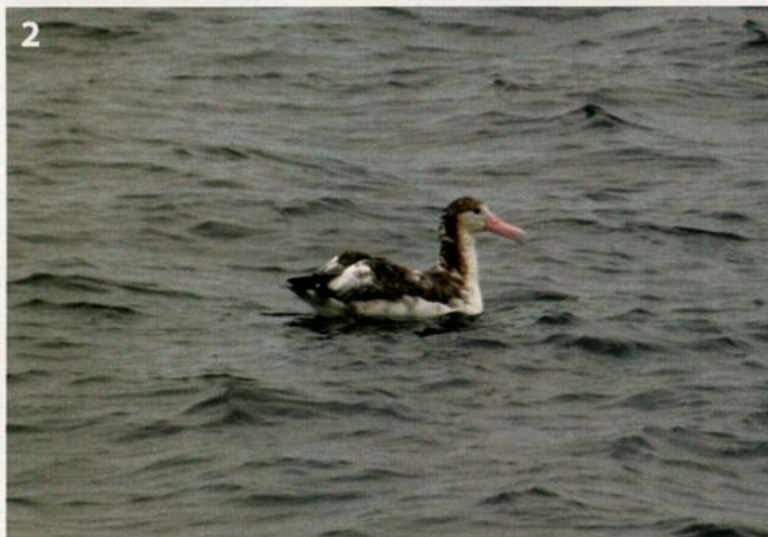
Short-tailed Albatrosses in Alaska



In September 2006, a Victor Emanuel Nature Tours charter sailed from Anchorage to the Kamchatka Peninsula, via Attu Island, and recorded at least 14 Short-tailed Albatrosses along the way. The world population of this Critically Endangered species has been rebounding in recent years, with 325 pairs rearing 195 young on their primary breeding site at Torishima Island, Japan, in winter 2005–2006. Almost unknown in North American waters over most of the twentieth century, this striking bird is now an uncommon visitor to Alaskan waters and is recorded annually off other West Coast states as well.

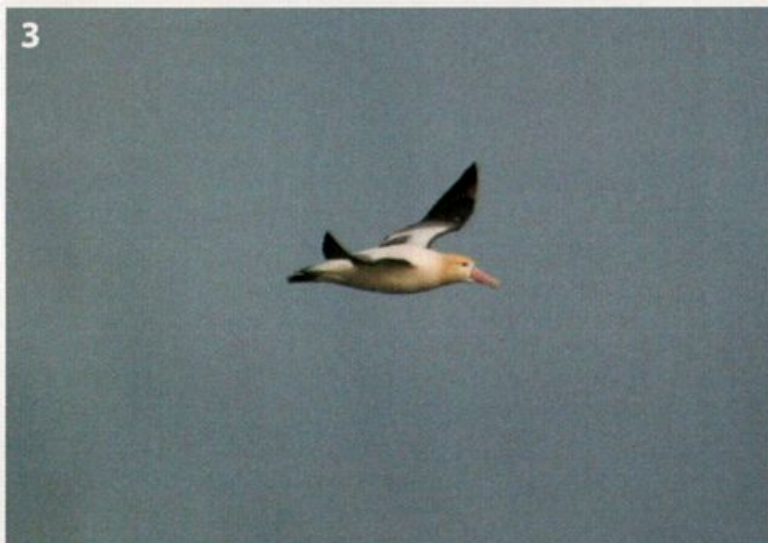
Ageing of Short-tailed Albatrosses is extremely difficult, due to the slow maturation of the plumage and the fact that the sexes, otherwise indistinguishable, appear to mature at different rates: 10–15 years for males, 15–20 years for females. Although our understanding of plumage cycles of large albatrosses is still very much incomplete, photographs such as these provide an opportunity to summarize what is known and to speculate a bit about the unknown. The photographer would like to thank Peter Pyle and Steve Howell for extensive comments on the photographs and for their generosity in sharing sections from their forthcoming book, *Identification Guide to North American Birds: Part II* and Howell's book, *Albatrosses and Petrels of North America*—and also Hiroshi Hasegawa, for information on current population dynamics.

1 • This juvenile or possible second-cycle (second-year) Short-tailed Albatross was recorded south of the Alaska Peninsula on 10 September 2006, the easternmost of its species seen on the VENT trip. Note the darker head feathers, possibly a result of the second prebasic molt. *Photograph by Marshall J. Iliff.*



2 • This Short-tailed Albatross at Seguam Pass 12 September 2006 is probably between five and eleven years of age (fifth to eleventh cycle) and can be distinguished from younger age classes by the presence of white feathering in the central back and wings and by the completely white underparts; older age classes show an almost completely yellow crown. If this bird is a male, it is probably younger (possibly as young as five years); if a female, it is likely older, possibly as old as 11 years. *Photograph by Marshall J. Iliff.*

3 • Stalemate Bank, 80 km southeast of the International Dateline and 105 km west of Attu, is known for large concentrations of seabirds. There, this Short-tailed Albatross (21 September 2006) was the only full adult in definitive plumage of the trip (probably 10+ years old if a male; 15+ years old if a female). It was among an estimated 1000 Laysan, 10 Black-footed, and two Short-tailed Albatrosses, thousands of Northern Fulmars, Short-tailed Shearwaters, and Black-legged Kittiwakes, and 25 Mottled Petrels. The next morning, just 333 km west of the Dateline, the group began to see Solander's Petrels. *Photograph by Marshall J. Iliff.*



4 • Probable second-cycle (second-year) Short-tailed Albatross at Seguam Pass, 12 September 2006. As with the bird in the first photograph, this individual is entirely dark chocolate-brown (slightly paler on breast and belly), but has a faint pale crescent below the eye and mixed generations of feathers in the back, belly, and the inner wings. The ragged trailing edge to the inner wing is due to at least five replaced feathers there, and photographs of the upper surface of this bird's wings show obvious molt limits in the secondary coverts (see also the first photograph). The molt in the rectrices is also a clue to this bird's age; a hatch-year bird would have uniformly fresh flight feathers and would not be molting during its first fall. Note the band on the right leg; a vast majority of young Short-tailed Albatrosses are banded. *Photograph by Marshall J. Iliff.*

5 • The Seguam Pass area is one of several locations along the Aleutian chain identified as a concentration point for Short-tailed Albatrosses. This bird was one of 10 at this location 12 September 2006. Based on the amount of white on the face and underparts and the replacement of three or four outer primaries and most secondaries—contrasting with the juvenal median primaries and some secondaries—this bird's age probably falls in the four-to-five-year class (fourth or fifth cycle), characterized by white mottling on the face, breast, and flanks and on the presence of two or more generations of secondaries and primaries. *Photograph by Marshall J. Iliff.*

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