

Huge ('albatrosses') or very large ('mollymawks') seabirds with long narrow wings and short tail. Long heavy hooked bill covered with horny plates, nostrils in small tubes on the sides near the base. Most are dark above and mainly white below. Pattern of upperwing, underwing, head and bill are distinctive. In flight, soar gracefully on stiffly held wings, and only rarely flap. Clumsy on ground; legs and webbed feet set well back. Generally oceanic; occasionally seen near land. Many follow ships or gather around fishing boats. Silent at sea except when fighting over food. Loud bleats, croaks, whines and cackles at breeding colonies, and elaborate displays accompanied by bill-clapping and calls. Lay 1 large white egg in shallow bowl or on top of pedestal constructed of vegetation and mud. Long incubation period and extremely long fledging period (7–11 months for full breeding cycle). Sexes alike but males larger. Juveniles generally distinctive for several years.

ALBATROSSES

14 species, 11 with breeding restricted to the Southern Hemisphere and 3 in the North Pacific.* In the New Zealand region, 10 species have been recorded including 2 endemic species and 5 other breeding species.

Albatrosses and mollymawks (the common name in New Zealand for smaller albatrosses) are a clearly defined group of very large seabirds belonging to the tube-nosed petrel order (Procellariiformes). Although they are among the largest of all flying birds, albatrosses are noted for their perfection of soaring flight behind boats and among the tempestuous seas of the southern oceans. In strong winds, they wheel effortlessly on very long, narrow and stiffly held wings for hours, but in almost calm conditions they have a flapping flight and more usually rest on the surface until the wind picks up. Their webbed feet are used for swimming and as rudders in flight, especially when coming in to land.

Albatrosses have long bills with a strongly hooked tip and small, raised tubular nostrils on either side near the base. The shape and colour of the bill plates can be useful in

identifying beach-wrecked specimens, but at sea the head colour and pattern of black on the wings is also important to note.

They nest in loose colonies, mainly on uninhabited and often inaccessible islands of the southern oceans. At their breeding grounds they have an elaborate series of displays accompanied by neighs, groans, baahs, wails, croaks, cackles, and bill-snapping and clapping. All species lay 1 white egg, usually in a shallow depression on top of a pedestal ('chimney pot') made of vegetation and mud. Incubation takes 66–83 days. Nestlings are downy and take many months to reach flying age. With this long breeding cycle, some species can nest only every second year if they have bred successfully.

Albatrosses feed mainly on various squids, fish and offal, on or close to the surface. Some species are readily attracted to boats and follow them for hours, occasionally alighting to pick up scraps cast overboard or food disturbed in the wake. Some are especially attracted to fishing boats, and in recent years several species have suffered high mortality from being drowned in trawl nets or after

taking baited fish-hooks on tuna long-lines. Research is under way to develop new methods to reduce seabird by-catch problems.

Reading: Harrison, P. 1987. *Seabirds of the World: a photographic guide*. London: Christopher Helm. Harrison, P. 1988. *Seabirds: an identification guide*.

London: Christopher Helm. Murphy, R.C. 1936. *Oceanic Birds of South America*. New York: MacMillan. Serventy, D.L. et al. 1971. *The Handbook of Australian Sea-birds*. Sydney: Reed. Warham, J. 1990. *The Petrels: their ecology and breeding systems*. London: Academic Press.

ADDENDUM

Since 1996, the following 11 species were accepted by the Rare Birds Committee of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand as having been reliably recorded for the first time in the New Zealand region. All appeared as single vagrants or stragglers, and none of the species has settled to breed.

LAYSAN ALBATROSS *Diomedea immutabilis*

Size: 80 cm

Description: Similar to adult NZ Black-browed Mollymawk, but slightly smaller, *the bill is pink, tipped black*, and the dark eye patch is usually larger, especially below the eye. Whole body white, except for eye patch, giving a frowning appearance. Upperwings and back, black; tail dark grey; underwings white with broad black edges and coverts, though the latter can be white streaked with black.

Distribution: Breeds on islands in the Hawaiian Chain in the North Pacific Ocean, and on Bonin Island to the south of Japan. Scatters widely across temperate and tropical waters of the North Pacific, but a few stray to the Southern Hemisphere. Recorded from Australia, Norfolk Island and once in New Zealand waters: a bird seen on the Lachlan Banks about 30 km off Cape Kidnappers, Hawkes Bay (December 1995).