



Toroa / royal albatross

Native birds

A toroa in flight is an unforgettable spectacle. The toroa or royal albatross is a graceful giant with a wing span of over three metres. Renowned ocean wanderers, they travel vast distances from their breeding grounds to feed – as much as 190,000 kilometres a year. They breed mainly on remote islands and spend at least 85 percent of their lives at sea, landing on water to feed or sleep. Along with the wandering albatross, royal albatross are the largest seabirds in the world.

There are two species of royal albatross, southern and northern. The southern is slightly larger than the northern. At sea it can be distinguished from the northern by its white upper-wings with black edges and tips, whereas the upper-wings of the northern are completely black. Both species have a black cutting edge to their upper mandible, which sets them apart from adults of the closely related wandering albatross. Juvenile royal albatross have black flecks on their upper-parts.

Toroa have great spiritual significance to many iwi. For example Moriori of the Chatham Islands wear plumes (raukura) of hopo (the local name for toroa) to signify their allegiance to the pacifist principles of the chief Nunuku Whenua. Taranaki iwi likewise wear toroa feathers to signify loyalty to the Parihaka prophet Te Whiti O Rongomai, a pioneer of non-violent civil disobedience.

Where are they found?

Toroa breed only in New Zealand waters. The northern species nest on the Chatham Islands and at Taiaroa Head on the Otago Peninsula, one of only two places in the world where albatross breed at a mainland site. The southern species breeds on the subantarctic

Auckland and Campbell islands, which are among the world's most important seabird sanctuaries.

Royal albatross range throughout the Southern Ocean and are most commonly seen in New Zealand coastal waters during winter.

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Toroa facts

- While royal albatross may be graceful in flight, their large size makes them appear clumsy on land as they doggedly walk from their nests to exposed sites to take off into the wind.
- Royal albatross usually mate for life, despite long separations at sea. Established pairs return to the same nesting area each time they breed.
- Toroa spend most of their lives at sea, returning to land only to breed and raise their young. They start breeding at around 6–10 years old, each pair raising one chick every two years.
- Toroa are some of the longest-lived birds in the world, regularly living into their 40s. One bird at Taiaroa known as 'Grandma', raised her last chick at the age of 62!
- Royal albatross males arrive at the nesting site first to prepare the nest. Both birds share incubation duty in spells of two days to three weeks (eight days on average) over a period of about 11 weeks – one of the longest incubation periods of any bird. After making a hole in the tough shell, chicks take about three to six days to finally emerge from the egg.
- When the chick has hatched, the parents take turns at guarding and feeding it for the first five or six weeks. Chicks are then left unguarded, except for feeding visits, until they fledge at about eight months. After a successful fledging, the parents will leave the colony and spend the following year at sea before returning to breed again, completing a two-year cycle. If the pair fails to breed they may return in consecutive years until they are successful.
- When a chick is fully fledged, it will stretch its wings and with the help of a large gust of wind, take off for its first major voyage. Young albatross spend several years away from New Zealand feeding in South American waters.
- Adolescents return to look for a mate at 3–8 years of age. They gather on ridgelines where the male birds display their virility by stretching their wings, throwing their heads up and screaming raucously, while admiring females gather round and take part in elaborate courtship rituals. Sound familiar?
- Although they eat some fish and other marine creatures, royal albatross feed mainly on squid plucked from the sea.

Threats

Their slow reproduction rates, changes in habitat and climate and some fishing practices make toroa vulnerable. They have declined to the extent that they are listed as endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and 'nationally vulnerable' by the Department of Conservation (DOC).

A storm on the Chatham Islands in 1985 destroyed the albatrosses' nesting habitat, reducing the percentage of nests producing fledglings to as low as 3% in some years. There are encouraging signs that their population may be recovering from this event.

Chatham Islanders have traditionally harvested royal albatross. However, since 1921 the birds have been fully protected. DOC is working towards a cooperative relationship with the traditional owners of the breeding islands that combines research with conservation.

Long-line fishing, drift-netting and trawling are a threat to a lot of seabird species. Many albatrosses discover that fishing vessels offer an easy food source and will follow boats to feed on fish bait and discards. They may take the food without coming to any harm, but some get caught in fishing gear. While most fishing boats catch very small numbers of royal albatross, scientists are concerned that because there are so many fishing boats around the world, the total numbers caught may be having an impact on some albatross populations. The New Zealand fishing industry is strongly supporting DOC initiatives such as Southern Seabird Solutions, which promote better fishing practises that do not catch seabirds. A combination of regulation and innovative techniques such as bird-scaring lines, weighted lines, underwater bait-setting devices and retention of offal can reduce the by-catch of albatrosses.

A convention prohibiting fishing with long drift nets in the South Pacific was signed in New Zealand in 1989 and entered into force in 1991. This paved the way for a United Nations resolution in 1991 calling for a global moratorium on long drift nets on the high seas.

Thousands of seabirds die in the northern hemisphere each year from swallowing small pieces of plastic. Although it is thought to be less of a problem in New Zealand, regurgitated plastics are often found beside royal albatross nests on Campbell Island.

How can you help toroa?

Certain fishing practices, such as longline fishing, trawling and drift netting, are a major threat to many seabird species. You can help by writing a letter to authorities around the world encouraging them to change unfriendly fishing practices in order to help these birds.

Further information

For further information about the royal albatross, visit your local Department of Conservation office or the DOC website at www.doc.govt.nz.

A. Maloney



Did you know?

Birds have been banded on Campbell Island since the early 1940s. Bands returned from dead and live birds caught at sea or found on beaches show a migration of young birds and non-breeders to southern South American waters and back to New Zealand. In other work, satellite transmitter packages developed by French, British and Australian researchers were used to track the birds' flight paths. Signals were monitored by satellite and the information used to learn more about the birds while at sea. One bird travelled 13000 kilometres during a two-week foraging trip.