

Bird Notes by Rick Pyeritz

*When man was created, it was told that he
Should have dominion over the fowl of the air,
But the message was never delivered to
The Skua because he lived too far away.*
--South Georgia Legend

Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans*

Order: Procelleriformes – from Latin for violent wind
Family: Diomedeidae –from Greek Diomedes, the name
of a Greek hero at Troy, whose companions
were transformed into birds
Genus: Diomedea -- as above
Species: exulans – from Latin for exile or wanderer

Waved Albatross *Diomedea irroata*

Diomedea – as above
irroata – refers to wave-like pattern of feathers

Along with the Skua, many types of birds including Albatross, Petrel, Storm-petrel, Shearwater, Penguin, Gannet, Gull, and Tern make the vast, harsh environment of the Earth's oceans their home. The turbulent Southern Ocean, which circles Antarctica, is the home of 18 of the 22 Diomedea species including the one which fascinates me the most, the Wandering Albatross. The wings of this huge bird span up to 12 feet, and it weighs over 11 kg. Like all other Albatross species, it has the ability to drink sea water---the salt is excreted through its externally placed nostrils.

In the late 1980's, scientists were able to place satellite transmitters on six Wandering Albatross. What they discovered was astonishing. In a little over one month, one bird flew 10,000 miles at speeds of over 50 miles per hour. Albatross are able to sleep while flying and to travel great distances without flapping their wings. Their long, narrow wings allow these birds to travel such enormous distances of gliding flight by utilizing a technique called dynamic soaring. In order to use this type of flight, the bird must have wind. The Wandering Albatross live in the southern seas where wind speeds of the roaring 40's, the furious 50's and the screaming 60's are common. Due to the friction of the wind on the water, wind speeds are slower near the water's surface than a few meters above. The bird simply flies into the surface wind which provides lift. As the bird ascends, it encounters a higher wind speed which provides further lift. The bird can simply turn with the wind, causing it to gain speed as it effortlessly glides. When it needs more lift, it simply turns into the wind as it nears the water's surface. This cycle can be repeated countless times without the bird ever having to flap its wings.

Albatross diets consist primarily of squid, fish, jellyfish and carrion from seals and penguins. They raise one chick every other year and the chick takes 9 months to fledge. The Albatross life span is quite long, around 50 to 80 years. It is fortunate that their life span is long since they have a threatened status according to the latest data from the International Union for

Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Although they have no predators, many birds are lost due to long-line fishing, non-native island predators of eggs and chicks such as cats, rats, goats, pigs, Skuas and Gulls, and ingestion of plastics. It is hard for a population to “catch-up” when raising only one chick every other year. Having a long life span is helpful.



I saw my first (and only) Albatross on Hood Island, one of the islands in the Galapagos archipelago. This small island is home to about 95% of the world's population of the Waved Albatross. Although much smaller than the Wandering Albatross it was still quite impressive to see it glide effortlessly over the waves.

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Sailors considered it good luck if an Albatross accompanied them as they navigated the treacherous southern oceans, and ill fortune if something should happen to the bird.

*At length did cross an Albatros,
Through the fog it came;
As if it had been a Christian soul,
We hailed it in God's name.*

Even today an Albatross around one's neck is a symbol of a tremendous burden, as it was for the ancient mariner after he shot the bird.

*Ah! Well-a-day! What evil looks
Had I from old and young!
Instead of the cross, the Albatross
About my neck was hung.*

*Both passages from The Rime of the Ancient Mariner
Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

For millions of years the Albatross has lived and thrived in an environment we find inhospitable. The Skua may never have gotten message about man's dominion but is living by voices we shall never hear.

*He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small,
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.*



Questions and/or comments – email me at eapyeritz@gmail.com.