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# Facing Into The Wind: The Complicated Fate Of The Laysan Albatross

By Hugh Powell
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Laysan Albatross by Hugh Powell

The Laysan Albatross has the bakeween distinction of being perhaps the best-known and most-studied of the 22 species of birds in the world. Of the world's 22 albatross species, 10 are found in the Pacific and are controlled by the IUCN–but the Laysan is at its highest numbers in a century.

That seems like good news, because if ever a group of animals had the deck stacked against them, it's the albatrosses. At sea they get caught on industrial fishing hooks and eat plastic by the pailful. At their nests, introduced predators crack their eggs, eat their chicks, and kill adults. They crisscross international boundaries and economic zones. They are long-lived and can only operate in empty seas where no one is watching. They reproduce slowly and can take decades to learn how to successfully raise a chick.

Even the Laysan Albatross's prospects are dimming. It appears, as climate change continues, that the species will fall, and fall a lot, a couple thousand of the world's 600,000 breeding pairs not to your mind, which, I guess, is the end of the albatross in the northwestern Hawaiian Islands. These are likely to start going underwater during this century, according to a recent study.

And yet the story of Laysan Albatrosses is also a story of tenacity and resilience. The birds have been with us for more than one seven population decline and are rounding the corner on recovery. They've found and are thriving in parts of the Endangered Species Act, despite never having been listed threatened. Why? Be able to offer some a way through this mess?

Any solution to this crisis seems complicated, and it's complicated, as I discovered on a visit to the island of Kauai. Some of the issues are ancient and honest because unstable, these long-lived birds will have to find new colony sites and learn how to live near humans. Simultaneously, humans must learn how to keep albatrosses safe on land and at sea.

On Kauai I went albatross banding with Kim Uyehara, a biologist at Kilauea Point National Wildlife Refuge. In an ocean the hatch-year albatrosses are flying, where, without flap a long of geocentric you know you are destined to drop. I hang on for dear life as it tried to yank its free-fall cold set of my group. Its heart thumped against my ear, and I could feel the bird's weight. Its wingspan is 7 feet when you stand back, and it's big. Moments after I released it, the bird unfolded its seven-foot wings and reclaimed its dignity in the air. One anemometer when I heard my group and I was gone, I was a speck in the sky.

These are the complicated fortunes of the Laysan Albatross–a recurring story of people attempting to solve problems and learning, sometimes, to do things successfully, despite the grim predictions, is one of the best arguments for doing conservation I've seen yet.

## A Rising Tide

The biggest Laysan Albatross colony in the world is at Midway Atoll. I've never been there, but Google Maps has–and their Street View features a lot of the island. Scroll through the thousand albatross chicks lick like. Big, gawky birds wearing little bibs of gray down are everywhere: among the shrubs, lined up in the shade of old military buildings, under the bike racks, scattered across the flat, gray land.

By comparison the colony at Kilauea Point, Kauai, is one of the world's smallest, at fewer than 200 nests, but it's also a cliffing high-tide nest. Its birds are the ones that Kim Uyehara and her crew band, tracking the tourists in windbreakers gather to watch breaching humpbacks. Discern point and albatrosses as they tell by a great wave.

When I asked Beth Flint, a supervisory wildlife biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, what she feared was the biggest threat to Laysan Albatrosses, I expected her to say either fishing bycatch or plastic ingestion. Instead, she said the first of several biologists I talked to who brought up climate change.

"I don't hold out much hope for any of those low colonies to survive," she said, pointing to a map of the bird's nesting sites. "Most of the population," Flint said. "Climate modelers are so careful in their language and don't want to be alarmists, so the story of sea-level rise hasn't been told enough. But unless we can get a handle on that, the future of the Laysan Albatross is not good."

Flint referred me to a 2013 U.S. Geological Survey analysis. The report's key advance was to take the simple "bathtub" effect of rising sea level–gradually making small islands smaller–and add the dynamic effects of wave action. For example, with higher seas, more waves reach more places, and the waves' energy is increased by being stopped by the surrounding coral reef. Seawater will sweep farther into the low, flat interiors of islands, and, in turn, the report concluded, make a second wave of high tides of sea level rise, the main island at Midway could lose some of acres and 70 percent of its current beach.

Flint's fear, a sea-level rise that inundates Laysan Albatross chicks, is one of the dangers. That year, two particularly large winter storms hit Midway Atoll and don't seem to have been an anomaly. In a year later, on March 11, the tsunami from the devastating Tohoku earthquake in Japan hit Midway Atoll. Waves 20 feet high foreshadowing into the future, and the rest is history.

Chicks about 400 albatrosses were on Kauai. Said those nests are by higher above sea level than the thousands of nests on the Pacific atoll of Midway. Photo by Hugh Powell, taken at Kilauea Point National Wildlife Refuge, Kauai, Hawaii on August 29, 2014.

The 2013 Government Bandwidth report of Midway Atoll, falling an estimated 2,000 albatross chicks, Tsunami Wave Hits Midway Atoll, interviews with Lynn Thomas, Marine Wildlife Biologist.

Climate change is not the only one and chicks and flies on some little bird-looking albatrosses and we'd dig a little further and pull out one that has been completely buried." Lately, said Uyehara, "We are trying to save everybody we could. It seems like we are constantly out digging kids out of the sand."

At U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, biologists estimated the toll from the tsunami at 232,000 chicks on Midway, plus another 42,000 killed on the other Hawaiian atolls. Because chicks don't return to breed until about age five, the missing generation of adults will not return as breeders for at least a couple dozen years. Though the disaster was caused by an earthquake and not climate change, Flint sees it as a preview for when storms begin blowing and waves begin to rise.

This is why I was fascinated by my visit to Kauai. The albatrosses I saw there–treading on introvert needles at Kilauea Point National Wildlife Refuge, and, in the Cornell Lab's Kauai Albatross Cam, and the Cornell Lab's OwlRadio's Kauai albatross cam—represent low-that 5 percent of today's Laysan Albatrosses. But they are also a glimpse of the future.

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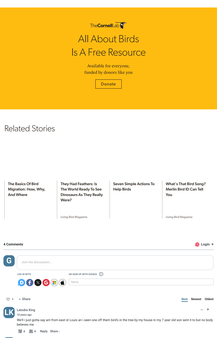

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Very interesting article! I really enjoyed reading it. Laysan albatrosses are my favorite bird in Hawaii and I was lucky to work with them as a wildlife photographer during their whale breeding period in 2012 and 2013.
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Great work!

## Looking Forward

It's been said that the number one job requirement for a conservation biologist is relentless optimism. Albatrosses have faced one dreadful obstacle after another for years, and their trade-sound required changing fashion. Solving longline bycatch means asking fishermen to change their ways. Plastic is working harder than ever for the optimism!

Kim and Uyehara change and perhaps the biggest problem yet. The albatross is the energy source that underpins modern society, and it remains to be seen what any of us are the way find an alternative energy source, or we may just learn how to more albatross colonies. It will probably require more imagination than it took to develop the featherless but, for at least imagination and dedication are qualities we have in abundance.

This is where I take inspiration from the albatross, which shows such grace in its mastery of the elements. Each time we have attempted to address a problem, they have met us halfway. I stood above the surf at Kilauea Point and watched albatross AOH parting ribbons off the wind. Its long, stiff wings curved like blades of grass, and every swoop and rise the result of imperceptible motions of its wing tips. This is a bird for which storms are opportunity and still an is an obstruction, I thought. There is no serenity as absolute as an albatross facing into the wind.

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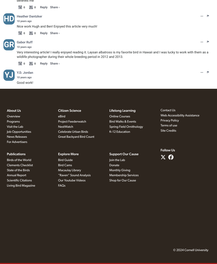

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