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Short-tailed Albatross

History of Torishima and Short-tailed Albatross

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Update: June 16, 2017

This page introduces Torishima in the Izu Island chain, where the Yamashina Institute for Ornithology has been conducting the Short-tailed Albatross conservation activities. It also introduces the history of population decline and rediscovery of the Short-tailed Albatross and the population recovery until the start of the decoy mission.

Geography of Torishima

Torishima is located in the south end of the Izu Island chain in the Pacific at 30°29'N and 140°18'E. It is located approximately 600km to the south of Tokyo and is approximately 300km south of Hachijo Island. There is Mukojima of Ogasawara Island chain approximately 370km south of Torishima.

Torishima is approximately 2.5km across and is about 7km around. It is a volcanic island and just the peak of the double volcano appears above the sea. The highest is the Mt. Iou which has the height of 394m. The island as a whole is designated as the national natural treasure (natural protection area).

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Short-tailed Albatrosses existed in uncountably numerous numbers

Even in the Edo era (1603 - 1868), when construction of large ships was prohibited due to the national isolation policy making navigation to outer-sea very difficult, people knew that there was an island in the southern part of Izu Islands where numerous numbers of Short-tailed Albatrosses existed. Such information came from the stories of sailors who were drifted but made home alive. In documents from the latter period of the Edo era, it was recorded that numerous white birds soar into the high sky in the southern sea of Hachijo Island, which looks like a white pillar rising from the ocean and is called "Torii-Bashira (Bird Pillar)". Well-known drifters to Torishima include Manjiro (later Manjiro Nakahama), famous fisherman of Tosa in the novel "Jyo Manjiro Hyoryuki (John Manjiro, the Cast-Away: His Life and Adventures)" written by Ibusu. He was also one of the drifters who survived by eating albatrosses.

The first scientific report on the Short-tailed Albatross in Torishima was written in the middle of the Meiji-era. It is "Torishima Bakadori no Hanashi (Story of the Fool-bird in Torishima)" written by the explorer Toru Hattori who visited Torishima in 1888. In this report he describes Torishima and how numerous Short-tailed Albatrosses occurred on the island. He explained that it was "truly incredible".

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Beginning of feather harvesting

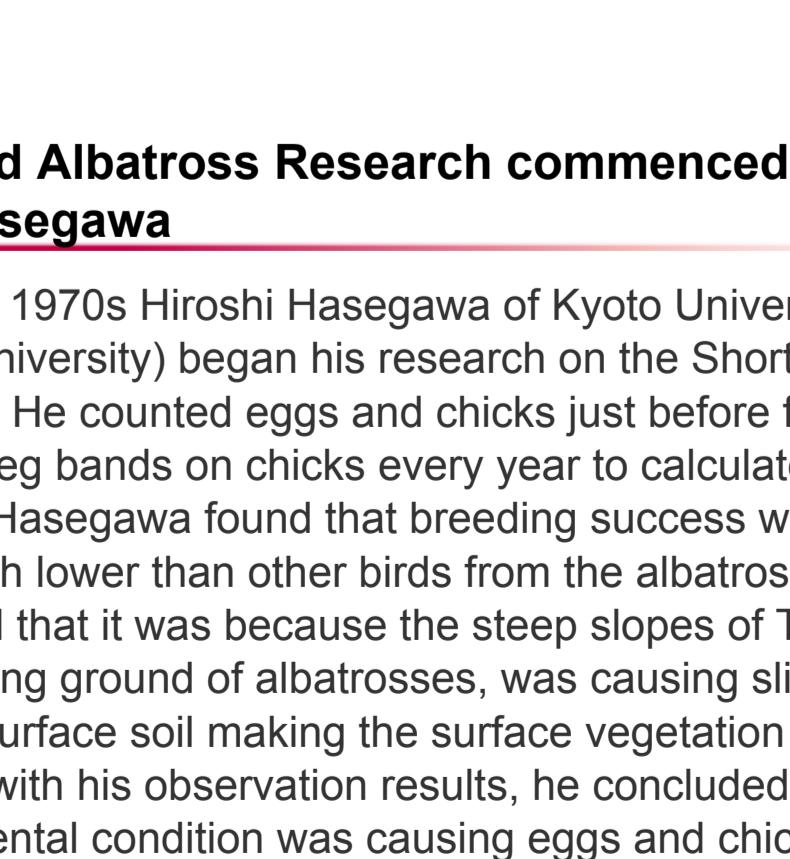
Why did the Short-tailed Albatross that existed in great numbers disappear to almost extinction? It is because they were killed by humans for harvesting feathers. Short-tailed Albatrosses are large water birds and produce large amount of good-quality feathers. They cannot easily take wings once they land, thus it is easy to kill large numbers at once on the island where they nest in colonies. Torishima was suited for a feather harvesting business. The key figure in this albatross culling was the businessman Han-emon Tamaoki (1830 - 1911). He landed on Torishima in 1886 and established Tamaoki Shokai (Tamaoki Company) the next year. He carried out a systematic feather harvesting until he withdrew from the island in 1922. His feather harvesting was exhaustive. He had 300 people living on this small island by 1900 and had built schools and light railway for transporting harvested Short-tailed Albatrosses. It's also been recorded that one worker culled about 100 to 200 Short-tailed Albatrosses a day. The report on the reduction of Short-tailed Albatrosses written by Yoshimaro Yamashina, the founder of the Yamashina Institute for Ornithology, records that at least 5 million Short-tailed Albatrosses were culled by 1902.

The feathers harvested from short-tailed albatrosses were exported as materials used for feather beds, down quilt and pillows. At that time in the Meiji-era the policies of the country was to increase wealth and military power and to encourage new industry. Feather harvesting was one of the important exporting industries. The feathers of short-tailed albatrosses are white colored and were traded at higher price compared to feathers of other birds. The remaining bodies of albatrosses were used to produce oil or made into fertilizer.

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Steep decline in albatross population

Due to the systematic feather harvesting, Short-tailed Albatrosses that existed in large numbers began to decline its population by the end of the Meiji-era (beginning of the 20th century), and the population dramatically declined in the Showa-era (1926-1989). The conservation measures were launched in the end of the Meiji-era, but they didn't prove to be effective on the isolated island. Yoshimaro Yamashina visited Torishima in 1930 and recorded the number of Short-tailed Albatrosses on the island to be approximately 2,000. Yoshimaro Yamashina was devastated by the sharp decline in the population and began to scramble for hunting prohibition in Torishima. Even after this, Nobuo Yamada who was sent to the island by Yoshimaro Yamashina recorded the declining number of Short-tailed Albatrosses, a couple of hundreds in 1932, and less than a hundred in 1933. Torishima was designated to be a hunting prohibited area in 1933. However, it is said that last-minute mass hunting was carried out immediately before the designation.



Torishima Island photographed by Yoshimaro Yamashina in 1930

Due to a decrease in the population of short-tailed albatrosses, Han-emon Tamaoki withdrew from his business in Torishima in 1922. The island became uninhabited for a few years until Shusaku Okuyama (1894-1978) began exploiting the island from 1927 to 1939. His business focused mainly on cattle pasturing but also harvested feathers from Black-footed Albatrosses Phoebastria nigripes and Tristram's Storm-petrels Oceanodroma tristrami instead of Short-tailed Albatrosses that no longer existed abundantly.

Torishima's volcano erupted in 1902 and in 1939. The eruption in August 1902 killed all of 125 people living on the island who were working in the feather harvesting business under the Tamaoki Company. Han-emon Tamaoki survived from this eruption as he was not on the island at that time, and restarted his business again the next year. The second eruption occurred in August 1939 but approximately 30 people living on the island at that time had evacuated from the island and were safe.

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Outside of Torishima

It is known that the north Short-tailed Albatross used to breed on several islands in the northwestern Pacific other than Torishima. These islands included Mukojima Islands in Ogasawara Island chain, Senkaku Islands and Daito Islands in Okinawa, Pengjia Islet in the north of Taiwan, and Penghu Islands in the west of Taiwan. It is a known fact that feather harvesting was also carried out in several of these islands. It appears that Short-tailed Albatrosses in several of these islands disappeared around the same time as Torishima. Senkaku Islands (Kita-Kojima and Minami-Kojima) are the islands other than Torishima where Short-tailed Albatrosses can be found.

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So-called "Extinction declaration" and rediscovery

A radar base of the navy was installed in Torishima Island during the World War II, but the status of the Short-tailed Albatross at the time is not known. The first person who visited the island to study the Short-tailed Albatross after the war was Oliver Austin, Jr. (1903-1988), an American who resided in Japan as an ornithologist for the General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers. He traveled to the southern Izu Islands and the northern Ogasawara Islands from March to April of 1949 and was not able to land on the Torishima Island due to bad weather. He however thoroughly observed the island from offshore and announced that it was "likely that Short-tailed Albatross was extinct".

This is the so-called "extinction declaration". The so-called "extinction declaration" was made in 1949, but it was not until 1962 that the Short-tailed Albatross was rediscovered.

After the rediscovery, the Yamashina Institute for Ornithology researchers began to study the Short-tailed Albatross in Torishima. They conducted surveys and censuses of the Short-tailed Albatross population.

With the closure of the meteorological observatory, researchers were not longer able to land on the island to study the Short-tailed Albatross. However, in April 1973, Dr. W. L. N. Tickle, a British ornithologist and Masashi Yoshii from Yamashina Institute counted 24 chicks and confirmed that the albatross population was slowly growing.

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Short-tailed Albatross Research commenced by Hiroshi Hasegawa

In the late 1970s Hiroshi Hasegawa of Kyoto University (currently of Toho University) began his research on the Short-tailed Albatross. He counted eggs and chicks just before fledging and attached leg bands on chicks to study their migration.

After the first few years of his research, he found that the Short-tailed Albatross population was increasing every year. However, it was noted that it took a few years for the breeding ground to erode again, often reducing the breeding success.

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