

51-Year-Old Albatross Breaks N. American Age Record

By Cameron Walker
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U.S. Geological Survey scientist Chandler Robbins has documented a new record for the oldest living North American bird in the wild. By tracking his records of banded birds, he found that a Laysan albatross on Midway Atoll is least 51 years old, breaking the previous longevity record of 42 years, five months, held by a bird of the same species. "It was a surprise," Robbins said. "I was kind of hoping to catch some old ones, but I didn't know I'd find one this old."

A research biologist at the USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland and winner of the 2000 Audubon Medal, Robbins made his first trip to Midway Atoll in 1956. At the time the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, concerned about bird strikes at Midway, wanted to learn more about the atoll's seabirds. Robbins banded tens of thousands of black-footed and Laysan albatrosses over a ten-year period to learn about their populations.

Birds and planes are no longer on a collision course at Midway Atoll, but now another problem threatens the albatross. Longline fisheries have been hooking black-footed albatross, another long-lived species, along with their regular catch. The Fish and Wildlife Service sent Robbins to the atoll again last winter to band black-footed albatross and compare their current survival rate to historical records. In the process, he re-banded a number of birds that he'd worked with in past years on the atoll.

When Robbins returned to the mainland, he recognized that he had documented a new longevity record when he traced the band replacement records. The 51-year-old bird now wears its fifth consecutive leg band. The albatross was brooding a chick when Robbins re-banded it last February.

About the Albatross

In general, larger birds like the albatross tend to live longer than smaller species. The oldest bird in the Guinness Book of Animal Records, a Siberian white crane, lived an unconfirmed 82 years. For birds in the wild, the record holder is a royal albatross named Grandma which went missing from its New Zealand nest at the age of 53.

The Laysan albatross ranges across the north Pacific Ocean, from the Hawaiian Islands to the Aleutian Islands, a distance of over 2,000 miles (3,220 kilometers). Birds spend summer in the north, then head as far south as there are suitable wind conditions. They make their nests on Midway Atoll during the cold season.

"They're wonderful birds," Robbins said. "They are quite large, but they're very graceful fliers."

These birds spend most of the year at sea. Juveniles don't return to nest until they are five

to eight years old. When these young birds do come back to Midway Atoll, it takes them a while to get their land legs. "They're really awkward until they get used to how to do it," Robbins said.

Both the Laysan and the black-footed albatross lay a single egg each year. Other albatross species nest less frequently.

The ancient albatross which Chandler spotted was thus just doing its regular ritual. But this albatross might not be the oldest ever. "These bands last only 20 to 30 years," he said. "There could be some older ones out there." Now, researchers are using stronger bands to track birds like these long-lived albatross.

Strike up the Band

Bird banding has been practiced for centuries. The first record of a metal band used on a bird, in 1595, is documented in history when one of King Henry IV's peregrine falcons took off in pursuit of a bustard in France. The falcon reappeared the next day in Malta, 1350 miles (2,173 kilometers) from where the bird was lost.

In the United States, John James Audubon may have been the first bird bander. He tied silver cords around the legs of a group of phoebes, and spotted two of the banded nestlings when they returned the next year.

Now, researchers use bird banding to track a range of avian activities. The bands can be used to determine the age of birds, like the Laysan albatross. Banding can also help scientists spot the migratory patterns of birds, learn more about bird behavior, and monitor how populations are doing.

"That's the way you learn what's going on with these things," said B.H. Powell, a wildlife biologist at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center who has spent many years banding waterfowl. To get an idea of what's going on in the bird world, it's not necessary to slap a band on every bird's leg, he said. Statistics help researchers estimate how a population is doing using the bands. "It's just like elections, when 3 percent of the population is reporting and you can tell who won," he said.

Patuxent Wildlife Research Center hosts the North American Bird Banding Program, a clearinghouse for bird banding information in the United States and Canada. Robbins, who has worked at the center for more than 50 years, started the Breeding Bird Survey from this site; now, volunteers across the country track birds at more than 3,000 locations.

The Breeding Bird Survey helped document the effect of DDT on birds and continues to provide information about population trends and non-native species.

Source:

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