Mystery of the albatross may soon be solved

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The mystery of where juvenile albatrosses fly to after leaving New Zealand may soon be solved, with satellite tracking devices now successfully showing the progress of two males and one female hatched at Taiaroa Heads, Otago, this season. The tracking of the majestic seabirds for the next four years is a collaboration between the University's Bindi Thomas, who is undertaking a PhD study into the efficacy of satellite tracking, and the Department of Conservation.

So far the equipment is working perfectly, Ms Thomas says, and the birds progress can be viewed at her website: animaltracking.googlepages.com … rthernroyalalbatross

One of the juveniles selected for tracking is Toroa, the 500th Northern

Royal albatross chick born at Taiaroa heads. New data available this morning shows he has travelled 1500km since leaving Taiaroa Head in September, about 800km of that in the past six days. He seems to have visited the Chatham Islands, where most albatrosses breed, and spent about three days sitting in the water 20km to 80km off the Chathams coast.

Toroa is now heading back towards New Zealand and is about 560km from the coast. Juvenile 55027, named Disappearing Gun Track Chick, departed in early October and is now approximately 22km off the coast of Timaru. She has traveled 195km in about a week. The second male chick to be tracked, named Richdale's Flat, is now approximately 95km from Christchurch having traveled 410km. All three are heading east, as expected.

The three tracked chicks are among 23 hatched this year, most of which are expected to return to Taiaroa Head in about 2011.

"We know they go across the Southern Ocean somewhere but we don't know where they go or how often they stop," Ms Thomas says. "We think they go to islands off the coast of Chile, but again we don't know for sure."

The transmitters fitted to the backs of the young albatrosses weigh about 30g, which is about 0.5 per cent of their 9kg bodyweight. The units are solar-powered, and can last for up to three years. It is hoped they will stay attached for up to two years, when the birds will moult and the units will fall off.

Ms Thomas' PhD study includes studying different tracking systems and assessing the economic and ecological benefits of using satellite technology for tracking. She has already undertaken study on three elephants in Kruger National Park in South Africa, a crocodile near

Darwin, Australia, and five falcons from Kaingaroa Forest in New Zealand's central North Island.

"We really want to find out how these technologies can help species," she says, "and that this is not just a toy used for interest. There are other tools biologists can use but the Northern Royal albatross is a long-range species, which makes conventional tracking methods such as radio telemetry or direct viewing difficult to maintain.

"Because satellite tracking has the capability to capture a substantial amount of data over a longer period of time at regular intervals, it will hopefully be able to capture accurate information on long-distance movement patterns without the need to have an observer nearby. There are already a number of projects that have used this technology for this and other species, many with successful results, but there is still a lot we don't know about this species."

Ms Thomas says the intention is to develop a greater understanding of the range of the Northern Royal Albatross, improving the management of its habitat, and dealing with dangers such as predators and longline fishing activity.

Source: Massey University