

Antarctic albatross displays shift in breeding habits

April 30 2012

A new study of the wandering albatross -- one of the largest birds on Earth -- has shown that some of the birds are breeding earlier in the season compared with 30 years ago.

The wandering albatross is the largest of [seabirds](#), with a wing span reaching 3m and a body mass of 8-12 kg. It lays a single egg, and breeds only every second year. The birds take ten years to reach sexual maturity. They have very long life spans, with some individuals living to over 60 years of age. But many are now being killed off before they can reach half that age, as a result populations are in rapid decline. Albatrosses have one of the lowest reproductive rates of any bird.

Reporting online this month (April) in the journal *Oikos*, a British team of scientists describe how they studied the [breeding](#) habits of the wandering albatross on the sub-Antarctic island of South Georgia. They have discovered that because some birds are now laying their [eggs](#) earlier, the laying date for the population is an average of 2.2 days earlier than before.

The researchers say the reasons for this change are unclear. Lead author Dr Sue Lewis at the University of Edinburgh's School of Biological Sciences said, "Our results are surprising. Every year we can determine when the birds return to the island after [migration](#), and the exact day they lay their egg. We knew that some birds were laying earlier – those who were older or had recently changed partner - but now we see that those which haven't bred successfully in the past are also laying earlier,

and these birds are effectively driving this trend in earlier laying".

The researchers studied over 30 years of data from birds located near the British Antarctic Survey's research station on Bird Island (part of South Georgia). Nest sites were monitored daily during the pre-laying, laying, hatching and fledging periods to document breeding patterns.

Numbers of wandering albatrosses on South Georgia have been steadily declining largely because the birds swallow baited hooks on longlines set by fishing vessels, and are dragged under and drown. Despite a recent increase in breeding success over the last 20 years, the number of birds at Bird Island has fallen by over 50% since the 1960s, from 1700 to only 800 breeding pairs.

British Antarctic Survey bird ecologist Dr Richard Phillips, also an author on the paper said, "This work is important for understanding more about the behaviour of these charismatic and threatened birds. In the Indian Ocean, an increase in the intensity of westerly winds has resulted in a shift in feeding distribution of wandering albatrosses. It is possible that earlier breeding in some females at South Georgia is a consequence of environmental change, but at the moment we are not sure if this is related to weather, a change in oceanographic conditions or food availability to which only some [birds](#) are responding."

This research is a collaboration between the University of Edinburgh and British Antarctic Survey and was funded by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC).

Provided by British Antarctic Survey

Citation: Antarctic albatross displays shift in breeding habits (2012, April 30) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-04-antarctic-albatross-shift-habits.html>

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