

Sooty Albatross



Agreement on the Conservation
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Artwork by **Di Roberts** from a photograph by Michelle Risi

THE SOOTY ALBATROSS is one of two distinctive species within the genus *Phoebastria*; the other is the Light-mantled Albatross. With their mostly all-dark brown plumage, distinctive partial white eye rings and their longer tails, they stand out from the rest of the predominantly black/brown/grey and white great and mollymawk



albatrosses with their short tails. Sooty and light-mantled albatrosses are restricted in their at-sea distribution to the Southern Ocean; the Light-mantled tending to occur farther south than does the Sooty. On some subantarctic islands only the Sooty breeds (for example on the Tristan-Gough Islands in the South Atlantic). At others both do, as in the southern Indian Ocean. On the more southerly islands and around New Zealand only the Light-mantled breeds.

Separating the two *Phoebetria* albatrosses is relatively easy in adult plumage, the all-brown Sooty contrasts with the pale back of the Light-mantled. When observed at close range, Sooty adults can be further distinguished by their yellow sulcus – a coloured groove along the lower mandible. Light-mantled Albatrosses have a pale blue sulcus. However, in juvenile plumage the sulcus is dark brown in both species that does not show up against the black bill. Both *Phoebetria* albatross species engage in graceful paired courtship flights, often along the cliffs where they concentrate their breeding on narrow ledges, either singly or in small colonies. Breeding is protracted and successful birds take a “gap year” and are thus biennial – as are the great albatrosses in the genus *Diomedea* – along with the Grey-headed Albatross. Diet includes squid, crustaceans, fish and small seabirds such as diving petrels. It is uncertain whether the last are actively caught, probably after dark, or are scavenged (as it seems it must be when penguin remains are identified in the diet).

The total breeding population of Sooty Albatrosses has been estimated at around 11 000 – 14 000 pairs. Trends are difficult to interpret - down at several localities, increasing or stable at some others. The species has been given a threatened status of Endangered. Mortality from pelagic long-line fishing for tuna does occur, but seemingly less so than for the mollymawk albatrosses. Land-based threats include nocturnal attacks by House Mice on both chicks and breeding adults at Gough and Marion Islands. The mouse population on the former island was due for an eradication attempt in austral winter 2020; in contrast planning for a Marion eradication has hardly started. Feral cats, rats and disease have been implicated on several subantarctic islands in the southern Indian Ocean.

Sources:

ACAP 2012. Sooty Albatross *Phoebetria fusca*; <https://www.acap.aq/en/acap-species>

BirdLife International 2020. Species factsheet: *Phoebetria fusca*; <http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/sooty-albatross-phoebetria-fusca/text>

John Cooper, ACAP Information Officer, 29 February 2020