

SEABIRD COLONY CREATION



WHAT IS A SEABIRD?

Seabirds are birds that spend the majority of their lives on the ocean and come to land only to breed. Some species, such as albatrosses, spend the first five years of their lives at sea before returning to land - they can even sleep while flying!

Unfortunately many seabirds today are in danger of extinction. Many species evolved to breed on islands without predators, and they are unafraid of things that would cause most birds to fly away. Predators introduced to islands by people, such as dogs, cats, mongooses, pigs, and rats, have wiped out many seabirds. Other threats to seabirds include being accidentally caught in fisheries operations (bycatch), shrinking nesting habitat due to sea level rise, and plastic ingestion.



HOW DO YOU RAISE A SEABIRD?

Seabirds eat a variety of fish, squid, crustaceans, and other marine life. We try to provide a diet that is close to the natural diet of each seabird species. Sometimes the fish and squid are fed to them whole, other times they are blended into a smoothie to mimic how their parents feed them.

Albatrosses are fed for 4-5 months, and for shearwaters and petrels are fed for 2-4 weeks. Once they leave for the open ocean, it will be 2-4 years before they return to the refuge as adults.

Most seabirds instinctually know how to catch prey and are not taught this by their parents, so (thankfully!) humans don't need to teach them how to eat once they leave the nest.



WHY AND HOW DO WE CREATE NEW SEABIRD NESTING COLONIES?

Many existing seabird colonies in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands are threatened by sea level rise and other aspects of climate change; Tern Island already is washing away. We are trying to create new seabird nesting colonies to mitigate the loss of colonies and ensure the future of the species. We use two methods to create colonies: 1) social attraction; and 2) translocation. These two approaches are complementary; the chicks are an additional attraction, and the visiting adults provide interaction and stimuli from real birds for the chicks.

WHAT IS SOCIAL ATTRACTION?

Many seabirds are social, gregarious animals that like to nest close to others of their species. They can be attracted by decoys and recordings of their courtship calls. The decoys, solar panels, and speakers in the photo below are being used to attract seabirds to nest at the refuge.



WHAT IS A SEABIRD TRANSLOCATION?

Seabirds have high site fidelity; most of them return as adults to breed at the place where they hatched. For seabirds that nest in burrows, such as petrels and shearwaters, they imprint on the site when they see the night sky for the first time. One way to make a new seabird colony is to move chicks to a new location (translocate them) before they imprint on the site they consider to be "home." After they mature, they will return to their new home to breed as adults.

Because the birds are moved as chicks, we have to raise by hand until they fledge (leave the nest). For albatrosses, this takes 5 months!

