

# Short-tailed Shearwater

(*Thinornis cucullatus*)



## Species Profile

Animalia - Aves

WEIGHT: 550g

LENGTH: 400mm beak to tail  
900mm wingspan

LIFESPAN: 20-25 years.

STATUS: Population decreasing.

## Short-tailed Shearwaters

In September each year, over one million Short-tailed Shearwaters arrive at Phillip Island to breed from their Aleutian Island feeding grounds (near Alaska, USA), most completing this extraordinary 15,000km migration in less than four weeks. Phillip Island's coastal cliffs are important breeding habitat for these seabirds. These sophisticated navigators are dynamic and mobile, travelling south to almost Antarctica for foraging trips, then as they migrate north they pass New Zealand up to Japan, skirt past

Siberia to Alaska and can be found off the coast of North America.

Short-tailed Shearwaters belong to the same family as petrels and prions (Procellariiformes) with dark brown feathers, a hooked beak and their narrow wings span 90cm, which allows them to fly as fast as 85km an hour as they voyage across the open oceans skimming and diving for pelagic prey. As major consumers of marine resources during foraging trips, shearwaters play an important ecological role in connecting marine and terrestrial habitats by delivering essential ocean nutrients to their island nesting grounds. Operating on a global scale (between the Southern and Northern hemispheres) means that Short-tailed Shearwater health is vulnerable to degradation of marine environments around the world. They are an important indicator of ocean ecosystem health and so protecting them also protects the many plant and animal species they share their vast habitat with.

## Habitat

Short-tailed Shearwaters enjoy an endless summer. From September – April (Austral summer) they nest on Phillip Island's sandy headlands among low lying vegetation like bower spinach and tussock grasses. The birds renovate or build new burrows that extend one to two meters long. From late March to late September, they spend their time out in the open ocean, migrating to the Aleutian Islands (near Alaska) through Bering Strait into the Arctic Ocean for the boreal summer to feed in highly productive waters. Short-tailed Shearwaters will rest on the surface of the water when needed.

## Diet

These oceanic seabirds are excellent swimmers, diving as deep as 50 meters in search of prey such as krill, fish and squid. Their beak is slender with a hook at the end to assist with catching their prey. Adult shearwaters have a crop, or pouch, of nutrient rich oil in their neck which can sustain them on long trips.

## Breeding

Upon their return to Phillip Island, shearwaters will begin to seek out their partner, often the same from the previous breeding season. They spend nights courting, sleeping and renovating their burrows. In late November they lay one large white egg. The egg hatches in early January and both parents feed the chick regurgitated food inside the burrow. Chicks may wait up to two weeks for food while their parents visit Antarctic waters to feed. Parents begin their migration back to the northern hemisphere in late March and early April with the aid of strong wings, leaving behind their chicks. The chick stays in the burrow for the next 4 weeks converting its fat and oil reserves into muscle and replaces soft brown down with adult feathers. At the end of April the fledglings begin their first migration, utilizing the strong westerly winds to follow their parents.

## Threats

The conservation status of seabirds is deteriorating fast, with one of the most threatened families being Procellariiformes which includes Shearwaters, Petrels and Albatross. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has classified the global Short-tailed Shearwater population to be in decline owing to ecosystem changes resulting from climate change. Their long-life

spans, reproduction rate (one chick per year), poor ability to defend themselves against introduced land predators (foxes and feral cats) and their foraging behavior makes them vulnerable to a range of threats and pressures on land and at sea. These include interactions with fishing operations, climate change (changes in sea temperature, ocean acidification), impacts on prey availability, ocean pollutants, marine plastics and debris ingestion and entanglement, artificial light pollution and other human activity in breeding sites, introduced land predators and invasive weeds.

## Island Ark

Phillip Island is fox-free which provides a haven safe from introduced predators for shearwaters to breed, but they remain vulnerable to human activities such as habitat disturbance, artificial light at night, road trauma, marine debris and plastic pollution and feral cats. On Phillip Island, fledgling shearwaters embarking on their first migration flight north can become confused by bright lights at night and end up landing on roads. Here they become stranded, unable to launch or fly without the power of strong cliff top winds and creates a very high risk of being hit by traffic.

Phillip Island Nature Parks provides a sanctuary for Short-tailed Shearwaters. Nature Parks rangers protect them through predator control programs, habitat management, education and the Shearwater Rescue Patrol. They safeguard fledglings who land on roads as they begin their migration, and conduct regular beach cleans to remove plastic debris from local beaches. Scientific research and other conservation activities are also conducted to better understand the implications of local and global threats to Shearwaters in order to protect them today and into the future.

*Shearwater guardians contribute to securing a brighter future for this protected species by supporting scientific research and conservation efforts to protect Phillip Island's wildlife.*