

Patrolling vast stretches of ocean and able to stay at sea for up to five years at a time, the albatross earns more air miles than the busiest business traveller. WORDS MICHAEL ENGELHARD

Very frequent flyer



Laysan albatross on Midway Atoll



Laysan albatross at Midway Atoll; courting display (right and above right); chick (top right)



IN THE NORTHERN SPRING of 2013, a 62-year-old female Laysan albatross named Wisdom claimed the title of world's oldest known living wild bird. In 1956, US ornithologist Chandler Robbins banded Wisdom on Midway Atoll near Hawaii. She was seen rearing her latest chick there in February 2013. Already at least five years old in 1956, Wisdom has now reached an avian biblical age.

While albatrosses are the world's largest seabirds, the Laysan wingspan, around 2m, is little more than half that of bigger species such as the wandering albatross. They are named for the north-western Hawaiian island of Laysan, which is a principal nesting habitat, along with nearby Midway Island.

After the end of the breeding season, in July, the birds roam between Japan and the Bering Sea and as far south as Panama. Raising a single chick, from laying to fledging, can take more than a year. They are true to place and mate, with adult birds rendezvousing each autumn with the same partner at the same site.

Albatross courtship requires elaborate dances; the vows are renewed annually and are unique to each pair. In up to 25 ritualised movements, couples beak-clap and bill-fence, bob and shake heads, sometimes tucking them under their wings. Then they freeze, chests puffed up, heads thrown back, standing ramrod-straight.

Such strenuous foreplay ensures that Wisdom and her mate recognise each other after the long separation. When the buff-white egg has been delivered, parents take turns sitting on it. Nests are frugal; Laysan albatross crèches seldom amount to more than a scoop in the sand. Foraging caretakers commute more than 3000km.

The new generation's maiden voyage often starts with a literal leap of faith – a cliff dive. Albatrosses, like pilots, prefer to taxi into a headwind to increase lift during take-off. Having left their birthplace, the six-month-old juveniles don't touch land for three to five years. They mainly feed at night, shallow-diving for squids and not turning up their bills at flying-fish roe or at crabs. They slake their thirst with seawater, able to separate the salt and expel it via a gland in the bill.

Afloat, they look out for sharks. Aloft, they monitor breezes. They nap while airborne, and during calms on the water. They ride the gyre of prevailing weather systems, and weather the harshest of storms. To save energy, they tap into air currents that brush the sea's surface, skimming wave crests and dipping into the following troughs. With bodies designed for propulsion, albatrosses can glide for 7m and lose only 30cm of altitude. Banking abruptly into breezes, they easily recoup height. With a shoulder tendon locking their wings into fully extended position, albatrosses can coast for long stretches without using fuel-burning muscles. They are so sublimely suited to their lifestyle that their hearts barely speed up while they fly.

THE ALBATROSS is absolutely a prince in its primary element, but a pauper on runways. It is ill-suited to launches and landings, which require flapping. An albatross is in trouble without wind to boost its enormous wings. Its slapstick "crashes" have to be witnessed to believe any bird could be this clumsy. The albatross approaches land at high speed and stalls only before touchdown, skidding to a stop on its chest, like a botched aircraft-carrier landing.

Such ungraceful arrivals earned the albatross the nickname "gooney bird", a 19th-century term for a simpleton. In Japanese, albatrosses are "fool birds", denoting their lack of wariness around people. It has cost them dearly; hunters killed them for mattress stuffing and on behalf of milliners, whose creations transformed high-society women into exotic, feathered creatures. Captain Bligh's *Bounty* crew put live albatrosses in chicken coops to augment their shipboard fare. After cramming them with ground corn for several days, Bligh thought them "not inferior in taste to fine geese".

Today, 17 of the 22 albatross species are listed as threatened (the Laysan is rated near-threatened). Long-line fishing, oil spills and the disturbance of nesting grounds by rats, cats and humans all endanger albatrosses. Perhaps the biggest problem for Laysans is the ingestion of plastic flotsam, regurgitated by parents to their chicks. Midway was a US naval base until 1997, and chicks raised near abandoned buildings swallow lead-based paint chips, which can cause the neurological disorder droopwing, kidney problems, compromised immune systems and even death.

Life can be tough for these mostly silent and solitary nomads. This was acknowledged as early as 1909 with the founding of the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge. In 2006, this became Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, including Midway, which, although currently closed, is normally the only part of the monument accessible to tourists. An easier visiting option is Kilauea Point Wildlife Refuge on Kauai, where Laysan albatrosses nest near the lighthouse.

Flying home for another turn at the breeding grounds, Wisdom might encounter birds of a different feather. By midwinter, snowbirds of the human variety have grown restless and pale. They flock to the warmer climes of Hawaii, craving their seafood in the forms of *o'io* and *tobiko poke*. For many, it is an annual journey. Yet none can approach the albatross, champion of frequent flyers.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES