

Seabirds in Strife

New evidence shows that commercial fishing is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of New Zealand seabirds a year. However, as Forest and Bird researcher Alan Tennyson writes, such a slaughter is both unnecessary and avoidable.



A drowned wandering albatross with a longline hook in its bill. Photo: Nigel Brothers.

NEW ZEALAND can boast the most outstanding seabird fauna of any country in the world. Being situated in the middle of the southern ocean and having a latitudinal range spanning over 20 degrees, from the sub-tropical Kermadec Islands south to sub-antarctic Campbell Island, our country offers nesting grounds to a huge diversity of seabird species. About 85 species breed in New Zealand waters, including 10 albatrosses, 35 petrels and shearwaters and more inshore species, such as penguins, gannets, shags, gulls and terns.

Forty five percent of our seabirds breed nowhere else in the world. This November/December, ornithologists are flocking to New Zealand for the world conferences of the International Council for Bird Preservation and the International Ornithological Congress to celebrate our special seabird fauna.

Few New Zealanders realise this country's huge diversity of seabirds. Unfortunately, the

ground-nesting habits of seabirds make them highly vulnerable to predation by introduced cats, stoats and rats and as a consequence, most are now confined to nesting on offshore islands where the public has little chance of seeing them.

Lack of protection

The lack of public awareness of seabirds has resulted in neglect of this magnificent and unique fauna. Fisheries by-catch problems have existed for decades, yet the majority of seabird colonies remain unsurveyed so that there are no measures of population changes. While most New Zealand seabirds enjoy legal protection onshore and within 12 miles of the coast, they are completely unprotected further out to sea. Albatrosses, shearwaters and petrels spend most of their lives in offshore waters where they can be legally killed. As with the conservation of most of our marine animals, the conservation of our seabirds has

been sadly neglected.

The foreign tuna longline fishery

Japanese longline fishing for tuna began in the early 1950s. It has been a major fishery around New Zealand for about 25 years. Daily, the boats set their lines, which are an astonishing 125 km long and have about 3,000 hooks. Each boat sets just one line. In the early 1980s, about 100 foreign longliners operated in our economic zone, but that figure has dropped to about 70 a year.

The largest foreign fleet has about 40 boats and fishes for southern bluefin tuna. These boats generally begin the season in southern New Zealand waters in late summer and move, following the tuna, to the East Cape region during winter. Only one spawning ground for bluefin tuna, between northwest Australia and Indonesia, is known. Most bluefin tuna leave New Zealand waters in