

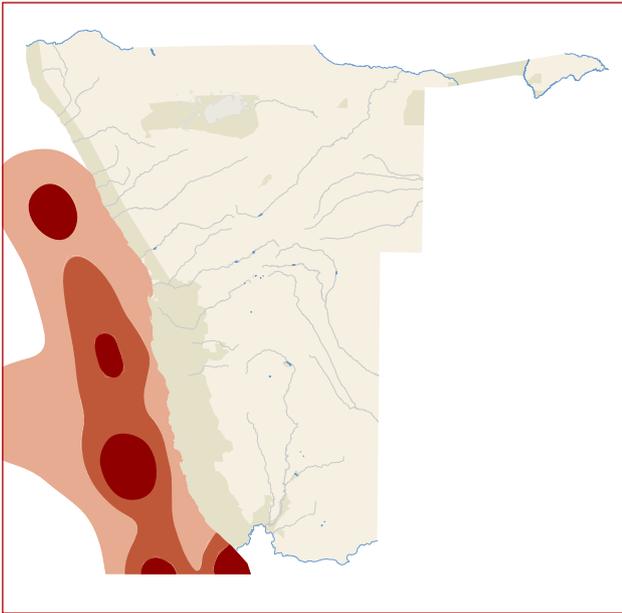
# WHITE-CAPPED ALBATROSS (SHY ALBATROSS) | *Thalassarche steadi*

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<b>Conservation Status:</b>	Near Threatened
<b>Southern African Range:</b>	Waters off Namibia, South Africa, southern Mozambique
<b>Area of Occupancy:</b>	Unknown
<b>Population Estimate:</b>	Unknown
<b>Population Trend:</b>	Possibly declining
<b>Habitat:</b>	Continental shelf and shelf break waters
<b>Threats:</b>	Bycatch in longline and trawl fisheries



## DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

The White-capped Albatross was historically considered a subspecies of the Shy Albatross *Diomedea cauta*, which has since been moved to *Thalassarche* and in 2006 was split into four species that include the White-capped Albatross (Robertson & Nunn 1998, ACAP 2011). Its breeding population is endemic to New Zealand and occurs primarily at the Auckland island group, with relatively small numbers breeding at the Antipodes and Chatham island groups. Its non-breeding range extends to the waters of southern Australia and most of the South Atlantic and south-west Indian oceans (Thompson & Sagar 2008, ACAP 2011, IUCN 2012a). Population sizes are poorly documented, but the global breeding population was estimated at 77,145 pairs in 2011 (IUCN 2012a), of which 95% breed on Discovery Island in the Auckland archipelago. Within southern African waters, it occurs off Angola to southern Mozambique and is most numerous off the southern African west coast. Its range overlaps in part with that of the nearly identical Shy Albatross *T. cauta*, but most shy-type albatrosses (comprising these two species) observed in southern African waters are White-capped Albatrosses (Abbott *et al.* 2006, Baker *et al.* 2007, Petersen *et al.* 2008a). It occurs primarily on the continental shelf and Ryan (1997a) recorded it closer inshore than other albatrosses in South African waters. In Namibia, however, this species tends to occur further offshore than the Black-browed *T. melanophrys* and Atlantic Yellow-nosed *T. chlororhynchos* albatrosses (Crawford *et al.* 1991, Boyer & Boyer 2005).

Between the 1970s and 1980s, the population of shy-type albatrosses in Namibia was roughly estimated to number 15,000 birds in summer and 30,000 birds

in winters (Crawford *et al.* 1991). Although thought to be more common in winter (Liversidge & Le Gras 1981, Ryan & Rose 1989), in the period between 1989 and 2003, the species was sighted most frequently between July and March, with a decline in abundance between April and June (Boyer & Boyer 2005). Up to 90% of birds were estimated to occur off northern Namibia during the 1970s and 1980s (Crawford *et al.* 1991), but more recent surveys indicated that most sightings occurred on the continental shelf off central and southern Namibia (Boyer & Boyer 2005). The White-capped Albatross is recorded three to four times less frequently than the Black-browed and Yellow-nosed albatrosses in Namibia (Boyer & Boyer 2005). Between 1995 and 2003, the frequency of sightings in Namibia had declined three-fold compared to that recorded between 1989 and 1994 (Boyer & Boyer 2005). However, this apparent decline may have been the result of a change in local distribution following the 1995 Benguela Niño, rather than an indication of a global decline.



## ECOLOGY

The breeding biology and breeding phenology of the White-capped Albatross are poorly known. It is assumed to be an annual breeder, but recent evidence suggests that it breeds biennially (ACAP 2011). Breeding birds appear to forage relatively close to their breeding colonies (Thompson & Sagar 2008), suggesting that the birds in southern African waters are mainly non-breeders, a notion supported by the predominance of juvenile or immature birds (R Wanless pers. obs.).

The White-capped Albatross feeds by surface-seizing or shallow-diving, mainly on cephalopods, crustaceans, tunicates and fish (IUCN 2012a). It may join mixed-species flocks feeding on schools of pelagic fish (Ryan & Rose 1989) and readily follows fishing vessels to feed on discarded offal. In terms of food availability, it possibly has benefited from the large-scale fishing operations that have developed in Namibian (and South African) waters during the past half-century.



## THREATS

As with other species of albatross, the main threat is through fisheries-related mortalities. The White-capped Albatross, with its complex life history strategy (ACAP 2011), is likely to be impacted negatively even by low mortality rates caused by fishery interactions. Moreover, bycatch mortalities tend to be biased

towards female and immature birds (Ryan *et al.* 2002). Between 8,100 and 8,300 White-capped Albatrosses are killed globally each year through interactions with fisheries (Baker *et al.* 2007). Longline fishing activities attract albatrosses to bait placed on large hooks on kilometres of line. When attempting to pull the bait off the hook as it enters the water, the hook gets caught in the bird's throat or bill, and the bird is pulled under water and drowns (Ryan *et al.* 2002). Mortality rates are probably underestimated because fatalities are often unrecorded when birds swallow hooks and die away from the vessel. Shy-type albatrosses are the most frequently killed albatrosses in the pelagic longline fishery in South Africa (Petersen *et al.* 2008a) and in Namibia about 180 White-capped Albatrosses are thought to be killed annually by this fishery (Baker *et al.* 2007).

Trawl fisheries attract birds to offal thrown overboard or to trawl nets being set or hauled onboard (Watkins *et al.* 2008). Birds are killed either when they become entangled in nets or when they collide with trawl warps (the steel cables that tow nets), resulting in fatal injuries such as broken wings, or birds drown when they are dragged underwater by the warps. This industry has severe impacts on White-capped Albatrosses (Watkins *et al.* 2008, Petersen *et al.* 2008b), and 910 White-capped Albatrosses are estimated to be killed in this fishery in Namibian waters each year (Baker *et al.* 2007).



## CONSERVATION STATUS

The White-capped Albatross is considered *Near Threatened* because longline and trawl fisheries in Namibian waters contribute an estimated 12% to the species' estimated global mortality that is attributed to fishing activities (Baker *et al.* 2007). Although little is known about its population trends, the species is listed as globally *Near Threatened* (IUCN 2012a) because of its complex life history and the high mortality rate related to fisheries. Revised or new Parks and Wildlife legislation should afford it *Specially Protected* status in Namibia. It is listed in Appendix II of the Convention for the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) and in Annex 1 of the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP).



## ACTIONS

Concerted efforts to collect data on the extent of fisheries-induced mortalities in Namibian waters have been initiated (Petersen *et al.* 2008a, 2008b, Paterson *et al.* in prep.), but additional information is needed



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to gauge the extent of the impact of each fishery on this species. The Namibian National Plan of Action for seabirds (NPOA) needs to be endorsed by the Namibian government, and its associated regulations need to be rigorously enforced. The presence of observers on all fishing vessels must be mandatory and observers need to be trained in the collection of data relating to seabirds. Mitigation measures that have been demonstrated to effectively reduce bycatch (Petersen *et al.* 2008c, Paterson *et al.* in prep.) are outlined in the NPOA and include:

- Lines set at night (between nautical dusk and dawn).
- Reduced deck-lighting.
- Bird-scaring lines (tori lines) with fluttering streamers – adjacent to the baited longline or trawl warps (the steel cables that tow nets).
- Suitable and sufficient weights to ensure a fast sink rate for baited hooks.
- Proper disposal of offal to reduce an additional bycatch risk.
- Use of thawed bait to prevent baited hooks floating to the surface.
- A deck-delivery system, where possible, that feeds baited lines directly into the sea without exposure to foraging birds.

In addition, the requirements of the Marine Resources Act (Act 27 of 2000), which necessitate the retention and reporting of all seabirds caught and killed as bycatch, need to be enforced.

Seabird bycatch mitigation legislation within international agreements to which Namibia is signatory needs to be formalised, particularly to reduce bycatch on fishing grounds outside Namibia's territorial waters. Organisations that need to formally address seabird bycatch include the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT) and the South East Atlantic Fisheries Organisation (SEAFO).