

Unusual Numbers of Laysan Albatrosses, *Diomedea immutabilis*, off the West Coast of Haida Gwaii, Queen Charlotte Islands, British Columbia

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Gaston, Anthony J. 1994. Unusual numbers of Laysan Albatrosses, *Diomedea immutabilis*, off the west coast of Haida Gwaii, Queen Charlotte Islands, British Columbia. *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 108(3): 373.

Fourteen Laysan Albatrosses, *Diomedea immutabilis*, and unusually high numbers of Black-footed Albatrosses, *Diomedea nigripes*, were observed off the West coast of Haida Gwaii on two voyages up to 10 km offshore in November 1993.

Key Words: Laysan Albatross, *Diomedea immutabilis*, Haida Gwaii.

The Laysan Albatross, *Diomedea immutabilis*, breeds in the Hawaiian Islands where the population is estimated to be about 2.5 million (Harrison 1990). The species occurs off the west coast of North America, from British Columbia southwards, in small numbers throughout the year, but more in winter than summer (Farrand 1983; Harrison 1986). It is considered very rare in British Columbia waters, where there were 13 live sightings up to 1988, all of single birds (Campbell et al. 1990). A further nine records from the B.C. continental shelf were mapped by Morgan et al. (1991), who considered the species a rare/accidental.

On 8 November 1993, on a voyage from Skidegate Channel south to Englefield Bay, about 5 km off the west coast of Moresby Island in the Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands) archipelago, I observed five Laysan Albatrosses in the vicinity of a fishing boat hauling cod traps. There were an estimated 200 Black-footed Albatrosses, *Diomedea nigripes*, 200 Sooty Shearwaters, *Puffinus griseus*, 150 Glaucous-winged and Herring gulls, *Larus glaucescens* and *L. argentatus*, 100 Northern Fulmars, *Fulmarus glacialis*, (of which 80% were dark phase), 20 Black-legged Kittiwakes, *Rissa tridactyla*, and two Short-tailed Shearwaters, *Puffinus tenuirostris*, in the vicinity. Most of these birds were crowding closely around the stern of the fishing boat, or aggregated on patches of discharged offal. However, three of the Laysan Albatrosses did not stay in the vicinity but merely appeared to investigate the concentration of birds and then flew on. The wind was light westerly and sea conditions were choppy with a moderate swell.

On 13 November 1993, I made the same trip in the reverse direction. The wind was approximately 50 km h⁻¹ from the south-east with big swells and considerable whitecaps. No fishing boats were encountered on this trip, but nine Laysan Albatrosses were sighted in the course of the voyage, all 4–6 km offshore, in flight and fairly evenly spread out. During the same voyage I recorded approximately 200 Northern Fulmars, 50 Sooty Shearwaters, 50 Black-legged Kittiwakes and 20 Glaucous-winged Gulls. No Black-footed Albatrosses were seen.

The number of Laysan Albatrosses sighted appears exceptional compared with previous records from British Columbia waters. The number of Black-footed Albatrosses seen was also unusual. Campbell et al. (1990) reported only one record of larger numbers of Black-footed Albatrosses; 280 in June off Virgin Rocks, Vancouver Island. The maximum number they reported for autumn was 125 and most previous records from Haida Gwaii waters have occurred in spring and summer. Morgan et al. (1991) also recorded maximum numbers in summer.

Water temperatures off the coast of British Columbia were unusually high during the period from spring 1992 up to and including November 1993. An El Nino/Southern Oscillation event of 1992–1993 had persisted for much longer than usual, leading to an extended period of warm ocean temperatures (Institute of Ocean Sciences, Sidney, B.C., unpublished). The presence of unusual numbers of Laysan and Black-footed albatrosses off Haida Gwaii in November 1993 may have been related to these high ocean temperatures.

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Received 21 February 1994

Accepted 4 August 1994



Gaston, Anthony J. 1994. "Unusual numbers of Laysan Albatrosses, *Diomedea immutabilis*, off the west coast of Haida Gwaii, Queen Charlotte Islands, British Columbia." *The Canadian field-naturalist* 108(3), 373–373.

<https://doi.org/10.5962/p.356810>.

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