



Laysan Albatrosses by Enrique Aguirre, Shutterstock

Seabirds and Ocean Plastic

Annie Chester
Outreach Associate
ABC Action Fund

202-630-0399
achester@abcbirdsactionfund.org

One of the biggest threats to seabirds is plastic. Scientists estimate that an alarming 17.6 billion pounds of plastic ends up in the ocean every year.

Seabirds are specially adapted for ocean life and face distinct threats because of their reliance on healthy marine ecosystems. One of the biggest threats to seabirds is plastic: Scientists estimate that an alarming [17.6 billion pounds](#) of plastic ends up in the ocean every year.

Plastic is made up of long-chain polymer molecules containing repeating sub-units. This molecular composition allows plastics to be easily shaped under heat or pressure. Plastic's malleability makes it ideal for use in a wide range of products, including food wrappers, clothing, car parts, and outdoor recreation equipment.

Plastic can be deadly to seabirds and [90%](#) of seabirds have ingested at least some of it, scientists estimate. This figure is expected to increase to 99% by 2050. Of particular concern are [microplastics](#), plastic particles less than 5 mm in diameter. Depending on the type of plastic, it can take items from [10 to over 500 years](#) to biodegrade in a marine environment.



Laysan Albatrosses and debris by David Slater, NOAA



4301 Connecticut Avenue, Suite 451
Washington, D.C. 20008
202-234-7181
info@abcbirdsactionfund.org
abcbirdsactionfund.org

Seabirds mistake plastic for food: Seabirds eat plastic because they [mistake it for food](#), research suggests. Laysan Albatrosses (pictured right) consume floating plastic pieces covered with flyingfish eggs. When adults regurgitate their catch for their young, the chicks ingest harmful plastic that can cause digestive blockages. In addition, algae growing atop plastic flotsam release the same compound, [dimethyl sulfide](#) (DSM), that is released when krill and other seabird prey feed on algae, drawing in foraging seabirds, including albatrosses, petrels, and shearwaters, to ingest the scented plastic.

Plastic use amplifies climate change: Most plastics are derived from fossil fuels. The continued use of plastics drives the burning of [fossil fuels](#), which is the leading contributor to climate change. This human-driven climate change contributes to ocean temperature changes, acidification, and extreme weather events, like hurricanes, which can alter seabird food sources, habitats, and migration patterns. Of these many challenges, sea level rise is of particular concern to seabirds. Many seabird nesting areas occur in [low-lying coastal areas](#); storm surges and flooding increase their vulnerability.



Laysan Albatross by Tony Kallman, Shutterstock

Seabirds eat plastic because they mistake it for food, research suggests.

What You Can Do



Marine trash and plastic debris on Midway Atoll by Steven Siegel, Marine Photobank

Talk to your legislators and voice your concern about plastic in the ocean.

Ask your Representative and Senators to support the [Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act](#) and [Albatross and Petrel Conservation Act](#).

Refuse, rethink, reduce, and reuse plastic, which helps eliminate the chance that plastic will end up in the ocean or in seabirds' stomachs.

Join organizations working to stem the flow of plastics into aquatic ecosystems. For example, a partnership called [SPLASH](#) (Stopping Plastics and Litter Along Shorelines) covers the Houston-Galveston region.