

Just a Trip to the Store

... ON WIDE, WIDE WINGS BY MICHAEL TENNESEN

THERE IS APPARENTLY NO LIMIT to how far an albatross parent will go for its chicks. David Hyrenbach from the Duke University Marine Laboratory and David Anderson at Wake Forest University deployed satellite-tracking devices on black-footed albatrosses (below) nesting on Tern Island, in the northern Hawaiian Islands. They discovered that the birds flew from Tern 3,000 miles to California, just to pick up some groceries. At speeds of up to 50 miles per hour, they make the round-trip to California in 22 days. These notorious migrants are designed for long-distance flights, with wingspans up to seven feet from tip to tip and weights of only five to seven pounds.

The birds don't even stop to rest along the way. Studies of the larger wandering albatross show that its heart rate while flying is no different than while sitting on the water. According to Hyrenbach, "It takes more energy to land and take off repeatedly than to fly really far. So it pays for the albatross to travel straight to predictably productive foraging grounds, even if they are across the Pacific."

Parents don't make long trips from the nest all the time. During the initial brooding period (January through February), one parent goes on short foraging trips (one to four days) near home, while its mate stays on the nest. Because food is less abundant there, the adults lose weight. During the longer rearing period (February through May), the parents make long foraging flights of 20 to 24 days to the extremes of the North Pacific . . . and everybody gets fat.

Satellite-tracking has revealed that breeding black-footed albatrosses commute to the California Current System, a productive marine region that stretches from British Columbia to Baja California. Very little was known about where black-footed albatrosses go during the post-breeding season. Maybe they take it easy?

Hardly. Nine birds were recently tagged on the Cordell Bank off Monterey. After traveling more than 5,000 miles in 50 days, two of the birds reached Hokkaido, Japan (www.oikonos.org/projects/albatross.htm).

Sushi, anyone?

