

The defining moment in the life of a young albatross is when it takes its run-up to soar into the air for the very first time. It only has this one chance. If all goes well, an albatross can live over 60 years and reproduce over a long period – one female from the family of Laysan albatrosses managed to hatch an egg at the age of 67. If the attempted flight fails, however, the young albatross will drown or be left behind and starve. As the bodies of the dead seabirds gradually decompose on the beach, the reason for their sad fate becomes apparent: Their stomachs are full of plastic.

Albatrosses are beautiful, legendary animals. They are among the largest flying birds in the world and can go the longest without landing. Their wingspan can be up to three and a half meters. Carried by the winds with barely a flap of their wings, they glide over the oceans of the southern hemisphere and cover thousands of kilometers every day. Many animals circle the entire globe. In times past, seafarers thought of the albatross as the soul of a drowned sailor because the seemingly mythical bird would often follow their ships for days or weeks without ever resting. Albatrosses even sleep in the air.

One of the largest albatross colonies is located on the Midway Islands between Japan and California in the Pacific Ocean, 3,000 kilometers from the nearest mainland. The islands are located on the edge of the Pacific Garbage Patch, a vast expanse of plastic waste. One of the islands is called Pihemánu in Hawaiian, meaning »the loud cries of birds.«

Among the ruins of an abandoned American air base, more than a million black-footed and Laysan albatrosses meet there every year to mate and breed. They take a long time to do both. Young albatrosses congregate on the island during the breeding season for several years before hatching their first egg. Their fascinating mating dances are not just to select suitable partners. The dance, which is practiced for years, helps the birds get to know each other better and better. It begins with gaping mouths, clacking beaks, and bowing, and ends as a synchronous dance in which the two birds exactly mirror each other's movements. It is important for the birds to find the right partner, because they stay together for life and need be able to rely on each other when raising their young. As the females lay an egg no more than once a year, nothing can go wrong. The division of labor begins at the time of hatching. While one of the two albatrosses guards the egg in cold, stormy, or hot weather, defying hunger and thirst, the other is often out over the sea for days searching for food. After two months, the chick hatches, a process that can take two days. Although the parents could help, they don't, because it is important for the chick to build up its strength by freeing itself from the hard shell on its own. The parents are content to stroke the chick encouragingly and lovingly with their strong beaks. Over the next few months, all of their time will be taken up feeding their young. They fly thousands of kilometers for days on end before returning with filled stomachs and stuffing the pre-digested food into their chick's beak.

This is how albatrosses have lived for millions of years, and the sea has always provided them with healthy, organic food. Their instinct tells them that they can trust the sea. They don't know that the oceans have been filling up with plastic waste for decades. They also don't know that they can get caught in miles of fishing lines whose bait they mistake for food. They have no idea that they are swallowing not only squid and crustaceans, but also toothbrushes, screw caps, and plastic forks, which damage their chicks' delicate mucous membranes when they feed them.

After seven months, the parents' work is done and they return to the sea. From now on, the young must fend for themselves, and the next meal may be very many kilometers away. Hundreds of thousands of young albatrosses now stand on the beach with their wings spread wide open. They are all waiting for the right wind to help them take off. If they succeed in getting into the air, they will spend the next three to five years at sea before returning to the island to mate. If, on the other hand, their attempted flight fails and they land in the waves, they will die. Will their wings be strong enough?

However, the young albatrosses still have one more important thing to do before their first flight: They need to empty their stomachs of everything they haven't yet been able to digest. But what if the hard objects their parents have unknowingly fed them are too big or too sharp to be spat out? If sharp pieces of plastic, felt-tip pens, or cream bottles get stuck in their narrow throats? This is what happens to thousands of young birds, and

it is their death sentence. They stay on land because they can't take off, and die slow and agonizing deaths.

Photographer Chris Jordan made a series of images documenting the Laysan albatrosses on Pihemánu. He intended to travel to the island just once, but the sight of so many dead young birds with bellies full of plastic shook him so much that he returned several times to shoot a documentary. Because they know no natural enemies on these islands, the albatrosses trusted him and allowed him to shoot very close with his camera. Their true enemies are rising sea levels, increasingly violent storms, modern fishing – and plastic waste in the sea.