

Shearwaters

The fledglings of these Flesh-Footed Shearwaters currently hold the record for the most damage caused by ingested plastic of any marine vertebrate. Our filmmakers visited a population in Lord Howe Island, where up to 100% of chicks are found with ingested plastic. Lord Howe Island was a pristine environment until it was noticed that plastic was found near burrows in the 1980s. This plastic had not been washed ashore, but brought from the sea by adult birds feeding their chicks.

The problem has escalated as the amount of plastic in our oceans has increased leading to these birds now being classified as near threatened by the IUCN. Not only is the physical nature of ingesting plastic a significant threat to the survival of these birds, but intoxicatingly high levels of heavy metals are also thought to contribute to the decline of the species.



Flesh-Footed Shearwaters are not the only species of Shearwaters to be threatened by plastic. The film crew also travelled to Trefoil Island, N.W. of Tasmania to investigate the effects on Short-tailed Shearwaters. Once a year an annual harvest of “Mutton Bird”, as they are known locally, are allowed to be harvested for food. During this event, the team looked at the stomach contents and found 100% of chicks contained plastic pre-production pellets. The adult birds have been radio-tagged and found to forage exclusively at the Antarctic polar front returning to feed their chicks.

