Sailors' Curse—Gliders' Envy

Albatrosses are known by many, not very complimentary names. Dutch sailors called them mollymawks ("stupid gull"), the English call them goonies (another reference to stupidity), and the Japanese call them bakadori ("foul birds"). These names are probably the result of the bird's inexpressive facial features and awkward movements on land. The appearance of an albatross alongside a ship was believed to be a sure sign of changing winds. As the old sailor with "a long grey beard and glittering eye" discovered, killing an albatross brought extremely bad luck (*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Coleridge, 1798.) His deadly aim with a crossbow caused the winds to die, and all sailors on the becalmed ship, except the mariner, died of thirst. The mariner was forced to sail on alone with the albatross hung around his neck.

> And I had done an hellish thing
> And it would work 'em woe:
> For all averr'd, I had kill'd the Bird
> That made the Breeze to blow.
> Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay,
> That made the breeze to blow!

The origin of the superstition that associated the albatross with breezes is not difficult to understand. The albatross has relatively poorly developed flight muscles and relies primarily on soaring flight and wind to keep aloft. Most species of albatross are found around the Antarctic, where breezes are almost constant and they can launch themselves from cliffs into the air with minimal flapping flight. They soar swiftly downwind, picking up speed and losing altitude. Just above the water's surface, they turn sharply into the wind and use the oncoming wind to soar higher. When air speed drops, they turn again to move downwind. Under favorable winds, an albatross can follow a ship for many kilometers, zigzagging upwind and downwind, without flapping their long, narrow wings. The sight of a soaring albatross usually does mean a favorable sailing breeze!

When grounded in calm winds, an albatross experiences great difficulty becoming airborne again. It must run along the ground, flapping its wings, until it reaches air speed adequate for takeoff.

Albatrosses feed on fishes and invertebrates near the ocean's surface and on refuse tossed from ships. After a courtship dance and mating, the female lays a single egg in a mud nest. Incubation may last as long as 85 days and parental care another 3 to 9 months. After leaving the nest, young albatrosses depart the nesting grounds and circle their newly discovered world many times. (For most albatrosses, "their world" is the entire Southern Hemisphere!) Albatrosses reach sexual maturity after about 7 years, and some may live for up to 30 years.