BY THE END OF YEAR 8

ILLUSTRATING THE READING STANDARD

"Flight of the Albatross" *School Journal*, Part 3 Number 2, 2009

Noun frequency level: 11–13

By the end of year 8, students are required to use a range of fiction and non-fiction texts to locate, evaluate, and synthesise information and ideas in order to meet the reading demands of the curriculum, drawing on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes described for the end of year 8 in the Literacy Learning Progressions. The curriculum tasks will also involve the students in generating their own questions as well as answering questions from the teacher.

The students in a year 8 class are inquiring into how animals raise their young. This text is one of several that the students are reading in order to find out about, and then compare, the behaviours shown by different birds and mammals. This inquiry process relates to investigating in science and to the key competencies of managing self and thinking.

"Flight of the Albatross" describes how royal albatrosses rear their young and the measures that Department of Conservation staff take to protect royal albatross eggs and chicks.

The teacher chose "Flight of the Albatross" as one of several texts that the students would be expected to read largely by themselves. It contains factual information that would help answer some of the students' questions, such as "How do albatross parents care for their chicks?" "What are the threats to the chicks' survival?" and "How long does a chick depend on its parents?" "Flight of the Albatross" supports students to evaluate and synthesise ideas and information within the text, which they can then relate to their larger inquiry.

The following example illustrates aspects of the task and text and demonstrates how a student engages with both task and text to meet the reading demands of the curriculum. A number of such examples would be used to inform the overall teacher judgment for this student.

Seventy-nine days later, a white, fluffy chick hatches.

Two months before it is ready to fledge, the parents put the chick on a diet and exercise programme – they feed it less and land further away, making the chick walk to them to get the food.

Not only is this the first time the nine-month-old chick flies but it is also the first time it finds its own food …

The student sets his own purpose for reading: to find and evaluate information about the specific parenting behaviours of royal albatrosses that ensure the survival of their chicks. He lists his questions and then previews and scans the text and photos, noting the long paragraphs. He reads the first sentence of each paragraph and skim-reads those paragraphs that seem most relevant, to get a sense of the key information. He uses this information to identify the main idea that the albatross chick depends on its parents for food and protection until it is able to fly on its own. He then reads the relevant paragraphs in more depth to find concrete examples that support his main idea, taking notes to answer his questions and identifying aspects for further research.

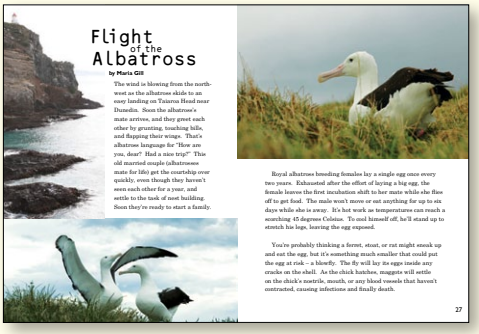
Exhausted … the female leaves the first incubation shift to her mate …

The male won't move or eat anything for up to six days while she is away.

Once the chick is past the vulnerable stage, both parents leave to find food.

But if one parent dies, the chick will not get enough food to survive.

The student evaluates and synthesises several related pieces of information within the text to draw the conclusion that royal albatrosses demonstrate specific parenting behaviours. For example, they provide constant care over many months, they share the rearing, and they have very effective ways of leading the chick towards independence.


Flight of the Albatross

by Maria Gill

The wind is blowing from the north-west as the albatross glides to an easy landing on Taiaroa Head near Dunedin. Soon the albatross's mate arrives, and they greet each other by grunting, touching bills, and flapping their wings. That's albatross language for "How are you, dear? Had a nice trip?" This old married couple (albatrosses mate for life) get the courtship over quickly, even though they haven't seen each other for a year, and settle to the task of nest building. Soon they're ready to start a family.

Royal albatross breeding females lay a single egg once every two years. Exhausted after the effort of laying a big egg, the female leaves the first incubation shift to her mate while she flies off to get food. The male won't move or eat anything for up to six days while she is away. It's hot work as temperatures can reach a scorching 45 degrees Celsius. To cool himself off, he'll stand up to stretch his legs, leaving the egg exposed.

You're probably thinking a ferret, stoat, or rat might sneak up and eat the egg, but it's something much smaller that could put the egg at risk – a blowfly. The fly will lay its eggs inside any cracks on the shell. As the chick hatches, maggots will settle on the chick's nostrils, mouth, or any blood vessels that haven't contracted, causing infections and finally death.

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He puts bottles containing rotten meat 3 metres from the birds …

… Lyndon checks them daily. He picks off any maggots on the egg …

During its first three weeks, the chick is vulnerable to predators.

The student evaluates and synthesises several pieces of information and makes connections to his prior knowledge and to other texts about introduced predators. He concludes that at Taiaroa Head, blowflies and introduced predators threaten the eggs and the chicks in ways that the parent birds are not equipped to deal with, so the parenting behaviours of these royal albatrosses are more successful when supported by human intervention. He makes a note to investigate how albatrosses fare in places where there are no humans to help.

Then, on Taiaroa Head, the only mainland breeding colony in the world …

The student compares the information he has gathered about royal albatrosses with his notes about the parenting behaviours of other native birds, such as kiwi and kākāpō. He identifies similarities but also notes the particular and unique parenting behaviours of each species. After reading the last sentence in the article, he plans further investigation to find out where in the world there are other breeding colonies of albatrosses and whether their parenting behaviours differ from those displayed on the mainland colony at Taiaroa Head.