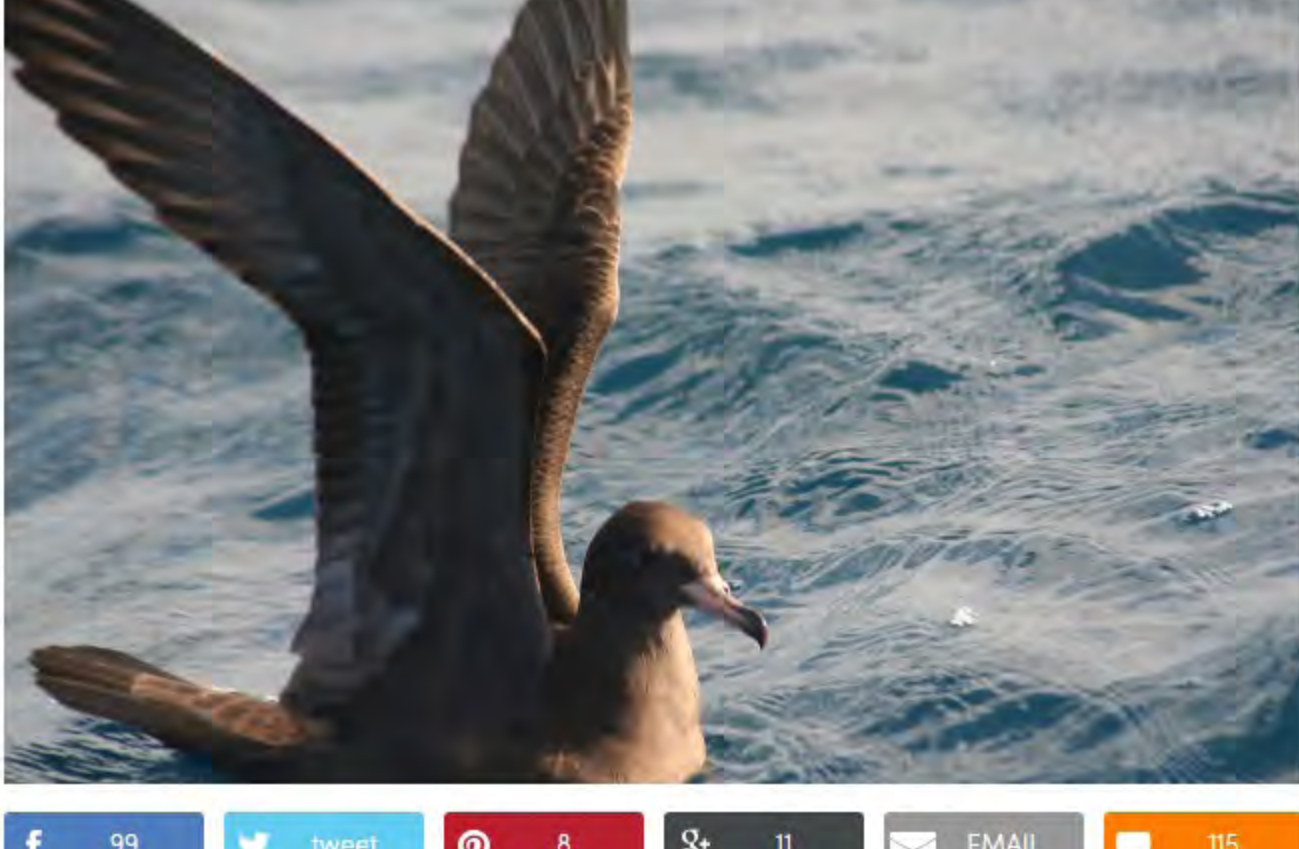




http://www.care2.com/causes/we-finally-know-why-seabirds-eat-plastic.html

# We Finally Know Why Seabirds Eat Plastic



By: [s.e.smith](#) | November 12, 2016  
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Heartbreaking stories of seabirds eating plastic — and the accompanying horrible images

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others?

The answer, it turns out, lies in a compound called dimethyl sulfide, or DMS, which emits a "chemical scream" that some birds associate with food. When seabirds find chunks of plastic bobbing in the water, they gobble them up, not realizing that they've just consumed something very dangerous.

Researchers at the University of California, Davis took some samples of plastic sewn into mesh bags and let them marinate in the ocean before bringing them to the viticulture lab, of all places — the facility has incredibly sensitive equipment for sniffing out unique chemical signatures.

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Researchers found that the plastic reeked — from a bird's perspective, anyway — of DMS, a compound emitted by algae as it breaks down. Algae commonly emits DMS when it's being snapped up by krill and other microorganisms that some birds feed on, so the smell is essentially like a dinner bell.

This finding also provided insight into why some birds are more prone to eating plastic than others.

Birds that respond to DMS do so because they have a sensitivity to it, and use this scent to track down food sources. Seabirds that don't rely on algae-eaters for food will still eat plastic, but in much smaller numbers.

The study could also be helpful for examining plastic consumption in species beyond the bird kingdom, and suggests that other compounds in plastics could send out their own signals to hungry wildlife.

But there's a kicker to the plastic problem.

As plastic drifts in the ocean, it can pick up other exotic chemical compounds, some of which can make birds sick or kill them. When birds respond to the siren song of DMS, they're also taking in a load of other substances that are wildly unhealthy for them. Clearly, plastic in the ocean is a menace.

Now that we know why some birds consume plastic, is there something we can do about it?

The long answer, of course, is to get rid of plastics and continue aggressive campaigns to clean up deposits of marine debris.

In the short term, though, there's another possible solution that involves formulating plastics to be less appealing to algae and other organisms that produce DMS. If the compound doesn't form in the first place, plastic may be less likely to register as a delicious source of potential food.

Photo credit: [Duncan](#)

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Thanks for posting.

**Quanta Kiran** yesterday noted

**Fi T.** 2 days ago  
No men can do the same, can't they?

**Joanne p.** 3 days ago ty

**Joanne p.** 3 days ago ty

**Fred L.** 4 days ago  
Aside from all the other plastic trash we produce, we need tougher legislation banning plastic bags. Oahu banned single use plastic bags, but left many loopholes. Eateries still can use them, and other retail establishments started using a much thicker, allowable plastic bag. It's reusable, but the thicker bag makes it even worse when consumed by wildlife. While standup paddle surfing today, I picked up only two plastic bags. The strong offshore winds blew most of our opala (trash) far out to sea. Out of sight, out of mind I guess. SMH.

**Rhonda BC** 5 days ago TYFS.)

**Janne O.** 5 days ago  
What about all the other sea creatures that eat plastic though? It's been said that leatherbacks eat it because they have poor vision and think it's jellyfish. This is a good find for some birds but do nothing to help sea turtles, marine mammals and fish.

**Marja Mohoric** 5 days ago tys

**Melania Padilla** 6 days ago  
Very interesting and frustrating; do your part and stop using these plastic bags as much as you can. Thank you for posting, sharing as well.

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