



## WORDS AND THEIR STORIES

# Why Is This Bird a 'Burden'?

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And now, *Words and Their Stories*, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples, notes on usage, and sometimes we use them in short conversations.

Many English expressions come from the world of animals. And, today we talk about a seabird called an albatross. An albatross is a large web-footed seabird. In fact, this family of seabirds includes some of the largest. They have long thin wings and are excellent gliders. To **glide** means to move smoothly, silently, and effortlessly.

Considering that an albatross can fly seemingly without effort, it is a bit surprising how we use the word in conversations.

An albatross describes something – a burden – that weighs heavily on us and prevents us from accomplishing something. It can be a problem that does not go away. This problem makes it difficult or impossible to do or achieve something.

An albatross can also be something that gets in our way – a roadblock that keeps us from getting what we want. It **hinders** us. Or if you prefer the noun – it is a hinderance to our success or to our ability to be happy. Some describe an albatross as a mental burden.

For example: *Her never-ending search for **fame** and **fortune** became an albatross to a normal, happy life.*

Here is another example: *His albatross was his huge credit card debt. It weighed heavily on every decision he made.*

So, how did the name of this large, graceful bird come to have this meaning? On Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, experts explain that this usage of the word comes from European sea **mythology**.

Albatrosses are known for following ships at sea. They can glide for long periods of time without **flapping** their wings. So, some sailors had superstitious beliefs about the birds. A superstition is a belief that certain things or events will bring good or bad luck.

In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1798 poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a sailor kills an albatross that had been following his ship. As punishment and proof that he killed the bird, the crew hung the large seabird from the sailor's neck.

To this day, the albatross remains a **symbol** for something that causes extreme guilt or something that is a great burden.

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

*Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.*

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## Words in This Story

**glide** – *v.* to move smoothly, continuously, and effortlessly

**hinder** – *v.* to make slow or difficult the progress of something

**fame** – *n.* the fact or condition of being known to the public

**fortune** – *n.* a very large sum of money

**mythology** – *n.* stories dealing with the gods and heroes of a particular people

**flap** – *v.* to move or cause to move with a beating motion

**symbol** – *n.* something that stands for something else *especially*: something real that stands for or suggests another thing that cannot in itself be pictured or shown

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