

REVIEW

Field guide to the albatrosses, petrels and shearwaters of the world

Derek Onley & Paul Scofield

Helm Field Guides, 2007. A&C Black Publishers Ltd, London. ISBN 978-0-7136-4332-9. 240pp., 45 plates. Softcover NZ\$94.95

This book covers 137 species of 'the avian order Procellariiformes, ubiquitous denizens of the oceans of the world'. It is aimed mainly at identifying flying birds, and the authors concentrate on those aspects of plumage, moult, morphometrics and biology that help with this. Field guides are challenging enterprises for both writer and artist at the best of times, and with this group of birds, albatrosses, petrels and shearwaters, further challenges abound. That Onley and Scofield have delivered a book that is useful, attractive, maintains a consistent standard for the most part, and is well laid-out and informative is to be applauded.

The book is arranged in 3 sections. In the 1st section, introductory pages cover everything from the taxonomy and species debate, discussion about the 4 seabird families represented in the book, useful identification tips for the birdwatcher at sea, brief notes on conservation, and some housekeeping describing 'how to use' the book. These are pages that many readers might skim through, however, they contain some little gems, including the plea to photographers and observers: "Please, please take the time to observe the birds and take notes as well as looking through the camera lens. How big was it? What was its underwing, upperparts, rump like? How did it fly?" Not easy with seabirds that might pass a boat only once, at speed and some distance away. However, without the supporting information it can be the difference between a sighting that is accepted and one that is not. The 2nd section is comprised of plates and accompanying notes (caption text). These are arranged with an easy-to-follow logic that should help ease some difficult identification issues. The plates themselves are mostly beautifully laid out. The 3rd section is the systematic text complete with accompanying distribution maps. With the latter groups (e.g. wandering albatrosses, prions, gadfly petrels, Manx-type shearwaters), the reader is supplied with further identification tips including lists of key features and tabulated morphometric data. The origins of the morphometric data are unclear; are they the authors' own measurements or from other sources?

Given the shifting nature of seabird taxonomy (stormy tide-riven seas come to mind in some cases),

of 'lumping' and 'splitting' within groups, especially albatrosses, together with the rediscovery of birds formerly thought to be extinct, the resurrection of old species, and even the discovery of possible new species, a book of this type could almost certainly be out of date when published. However, as the authors note, it is 'worth remembering that the taxonomic status of the majority of albatrosses and petrels had remained much the same for 70 years, and those that have changed have, in most cases, been recognised as different species or as a subspecies for some time.' In other words physical differences between taxa, however subtle, exist, and while a resulting identification may not separate a valid species, or (importantly for some) yield a 'tick' for the bird watcher, the authors are clearly comfortable in their tackling of the nitty-gritty of seabird identification (i.e., the various colour morphs or phases within species, sub-specific differences, juvenile, fresh and worn plumages).

The authors profess to adopt 'the adage that if you can't recognise it at sea then don't separate it'. This is an admittedly conservative approach, and yet it appears at odds with their adopting the molecular approach of Austin *et al.* (2008) in tackling the little/Audubon shearwater maze, while at the same time recognising subantarctic little shearwater (*Puffinus elegans*), due to its different biology and appearance. On the other hand, it is a little surprising to find (for example) that the 'slightly larger, white-rumped' *Pelagodroma marina albiclunus* (Kermadec storm-petrel), 'considered by some to be a separate species' is not depicted in the plates. Also, given the close examination of black and white storm-petrels in the Pacific following the rediscovery of the New Zealand storm-petrel (*Pealeornis maoriana*; Flood 2003, Saville *et al.* 2003), there is no mention of the markedly-streaked *lineata* specimen from the Marquesas (AMNH 194110) in the discussion for Plate 45: 2 white-bellied storm-petrel *Fregetta grallaria*. Such a discussion would be especially useful since the bird illustrated depicts the small Chilean form *segethi*, which exhibits 'some streaking' on the flanks, and is painted from museum specimens.

The distribution maps with their solid colours give the appearance of certainty, and while they might be based on the best available information, they inevitably fall short as a result, a general complaint for maps of this type in books. With more birdwatchers finding the stomach to venture out to sea, especially with the advent of trans-oceanic cruises and expeditions to previously poorly-studied areas, our knowledge of species distributions is rapidly increasing. For example, recent sightings that date the maps have been made of: Vanuatu petrel *Pterodroma occulta* and the 'magnificent' form of the collared petrel *P. brevipes*

in Vanuatu waters, Murphy's petrel *P. ultima* in Fiji, more frequent records of providence petrel *P. solandri* close to the New Zealand mainland, great shearwater *Puffinus gravis* in the Pacific Ocean with birds seen off North and South America, New Zealand and Australia, and New Zealand storm petrels off eastern Australia and New Caledonia. Likewise, GPS tracking of seabirds is a burgeoning research area and is revealing some remarkable movements of birds, not only for the better known albatrosses and larger petrels, but for smaller species such as the Bermuda (*Pterodroma cahow*), Cook's (*P. cookii*) and mottled (*P. inexpectata*) petrels.

Onley's relatively soft and painterly-style generally works well although in some paintings the birds can, with closer inspection, present confusing shapes and plumage (e.g. Plate 11: giant petrels). His artwork, while not as crisp or stylized as some (e.g. J.N. Davies in Marchant & Higgins (1990a) and B. Jarrett in Shirihai (2007)), avoids the pitfall of over-delineating the feathers that can give seabirds, birds which exemplify neatness, a rather bedraggled appearance (e.g. H. D. Pratt in his otherwise superb *Birds of Hawaii and the Tropical Pacific* (1987)). In Onley and Scofield (2007) the depicted birds are occasionally in danger of vanishing from the page. The royal albatrosses (Plate 3) are a good example, appearing less than majestic and saved only by their black upperwings. This could have been avoided either by the artist using a colour background in creating each plate, or, following completion of the artwork clear-cutting the individual birds and setting them against tonal or coloured background(s), an editorial consideration. Colour phases are well managed as are facial patterns and bill details. Onley appears to be most comfortable depicting portraits (heads), an area in which his birds are most 'alive'. Aside from presenting key information it is pleasing to have these details drawing the reader closer to these remarkable creatures.

With guide books, space is at a premium and authors are already called upon to cram as much as possible into the plates; it is a pity nevertheless there isn't more visual information about flight behaviour. While described in the text, and in considerable detail in some cases (e.g. fulmar prion), a plate showing the differences within some groups would help considerably with their identification. Storm-petrels are a good example where flight and shape are useful guides in separating different species seen together, or when identifying a bird seen either momentarily or distantly.

On balance, as 'a book for birders, birdwatchers and others who go to sea', Onley and Scofield (2007) works extremely well in the field. The book achieves much within its relatively compact form, 45 plates and 240 pages. This is borne out by the many well-thumbed, annotated, saltwater-marked copies of the books I have seen on boats, and my own 3 copies graded 'take anywhere', 'this remains inside the cabin, always', and the close-to-immaculate 'home reference'.

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