

## REVIEW

### **Birds of New Zealand; a photographic guide**

Paul Scofield and Brent Stephenson

Auckland University Press, 2013, Auckland

ISBN 9781869407339. 546 pp., Paperback \$59.99.

There are a plethora of photographic guides to New Zealand's birds, and yet I awaited this volume with much anticipation. Written and illustrated by 2 of New Zealand's leading birders, this had the potential to fill an as-yet vacant niche – a comprehensive and authoritative guide combining breadth, depth, detail and aesthetics. First impressions were good. It is a well laid-out, solid book crammed with information and gorgeous images. My personal copy has 3 pages of misaligned printing, but other copies that I have seen were not so affected.

Most of the 242 species covered in the main section of the book have a couple of pages of text each, a distribution map, and typically 3-5 photographs. This is followed by 16 pages of 'rare vagrants', covering 122 species (56 of which are illustrated). Those species given full coverage have sections on Identification, Vocalisations, Separation from similar species, Distribution, Breeding biology, Biometrics, and Taxonomic notes (including detailed explanations of the meaning of their names), while the rare vagrants have little more than a brief summary of their occurrence in New Zealand.

This division between rare vagrants and other species is both unfortunate (as similar species are thereby often separated, and there is scant information on how to identify the rarest species) and arbitrary, as 12 species labelled as 'Rare vagrant' are covered in the main section of the book (e.g., Australian pelican *Pelecanus conspicillatus*, grey plover *Pluvialis squatarola*, and common tern *Sterna hirundo*). The authors state that space restrictions prevented all the rare vagrants being illustrated, which seems a strange decision for a photographic guide, especially when so much space in the book is devoted to explaining the meaning of birds' scientific, common and Māori names.

The decision on which rare vagrant species to illustrate (or not) was apparently determined primarily by the breadth of Stephenson's impressive photographic portfolio. This has led to some curious outcomes, including illustrating the northern pintail (*Anas acuta*) with an adult female, when the only New Zealand record was of a male in breeding plumage (or 'alternate plumage' using the terminology favoured by the authors; Petyt 1999).

The images are generally superb, but again are constrained by almost exclusive reliance on Stephenson's own images, regardless of whether or not they are the most appropriate to illustrate New Zealand birds. While the authors were willing to

use images provided by others to illustrate endemic subantarctic island taxa not seen by Stephenson, they chose to use his Antarctic Peninsula or South Shetland Islands images of southern skua (*Catharacta antarctica*) and Antarctic tern (*Sterna vittata*; the latter a different subspecies to New Zealand birds), when local images would have been readily available from their existing collaborators.

The image captions provide far more detail on plumage states than will be found in other New Zealand photographic guides, sometimes pointing out detail that I found hard to discern, e.g., filoplumes on a black petrel (*Procellaria parkinsoni*) on p.171 and on an intermediate (plumed) egret (*Ardea intermedia*) on p. 247, and the orange flank spots on an orange-fronted parakeet (*Cyanoramphus malherbi*) on p.399 (lower image). There is much good information in these captions, but their effectiveness is dulled by several images that are of the wrong species, or that show different sex or plumage states to those claimed. For example, on p. 87 (lower image) a Fiordland crested penguin (*Eudyptes pachyrhynchus*) (the bird on the left) is captioned as a Snares crested penguin (*E. robustus*), on p. 228 an image of juvenile little shags (*Phalacrocorax melanoleucos*) is captioned as being of little black shags (*P. sulcirostris*), an image of a white heron (great egret; *Ardea modesta*) at Milford Sound is used to illustrate the intermediate egret on p. 248, and a first winter fairy tern (*Sternula nereis*) is captioned as being an adult in basic plumage on p. 357.

However, it is the text and distribution maps that disappoint most – specifically the apparent lack of peer review and editing (there is no Acknowledgements section to confirm or refute this). Often the authors have ended up stating the exact opposite of what presumably was intended. For example, we are informed that ratites have keeled sternums (p. 12), and that whitehead (*Mohoua albigilla*) and yellowhead (*M. ochrocephala*) have sympatric distributions (pp. 451 & 454), whilst the terms eruptive and irruptive are confused throughout. And what is meant by "This species does not occur throughout the Antipodes Islands, however (only on the Antipodes Islands)" (p.403)? This sloppy writing has also affected the identification sections, where there is a lot of confusing information and many meaningless sentences. Apparently the Antarctic tern has both a "shorter and slimmer bill" and a bill that is "considerably longer" than that of the Arctic tern (*Sterna paradisaea*; compare caption and text on p.371), while the masked or blue-faced booby (*Sula dactylatra*) is described as having a dark facemask, unless it is a male (which has "facemask yellow") or a female (which has "facemask...greenish yellow"). Other 'opposite-to-what-was-intended' identification information includes white-capped

mollymawk (*Thalassarche cauta*) being “slightly smaller” than Salvin’s mollymawk (*T. salvini*) and Chatham Island mollymawk (*T. eremita*; p. 115), Westland petrel (*Procellaria westlandica*) having “less black on [bill] tip” than white-chinned petrel (*P. aequinoctialis*; p. 170), the gull-billed tern (*Gelochelidon nilotica*) having “a much stouter, longer, red bill” than a Caspian tern (*Hydroprogne caspia*; p. 361), and white-fronted tern (*Sterna striata*) being smaller than common tern (p. 368).

The authors relied heavily on copy-and-paste in the breeding ecology sections, without always checking whether the information remained relevant. For example, we are informed that erect-crested penguins (*Eudyptes sclateri*) nest “under large tree roots”, when there are no trees at their only breeding sites on the Bounty and Antipodes Islands, and that northern royal albatrosses (*Diomedea sanfordi*) nest “on *Poa* tussock grassland of sub-Antarctic islands” when they nest among herbfields on The Sisters and Forty Fours within the Chatham Islands, plus at Taiaroa Head. The 3 *Coenocorypha* snipe species are described as having incubation lengths of c.1 month or 37-39 days (all should be within the range 18-22 days), and the information on the 2 cuckoos and their apparent plethora of hosts is very misleading – including that the 3 *Mohoua* species are hosts for shining cuckoo *Chalcites lucidus* (pp. 453, 455 & 457), and that the long-tailed cuckoo (*Eudynamys taitensis*) occurs wherever its host the New Zealand fantail (*Rhipidura fuliginosa*) abounds (p. 408).

The distribution maps are similarly error-ridden. Among those showing distributions of birds on outlying islands, I noted at least 28 false positives (i.e., species shown to be present when they are not), e.g., pied stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*), banded dotterel (*Charadrius bicinctus*), red-billed gull (*Larus novaehollandiae*) and welcome swallow (*Hirundo neoxena*) on the Bounty Islands. There are also at least 11 false negatives among the maps, e.g., black-browed mollymawk (*Thalassarche melanophris*), white-capped mollymawk (*T. cauta*) and white-headed petrel (*Pterodroma lessonii*) are all shown as

being absent from the Antipodes Islands, when all 3 species breed there.

There is a large amount of information given in the ‘Taxonomic notes’ sections that is simply incorrect, including that James Cook named The Snares (pp. 87, 288 & 481) – the islands were discovered by George Vancouver 12 years after Cook’s death – and that the other ‘spur-winged plover’ (i.e., *Vanellus spinosus*) is found in South America (it is an African species). Many of the etymologies contain false information, including that the northern royal albatross was named after Rollin Brewster Sanford (it was named after Dr Leonard Cutler Sanford), that the Snares Island snipe *Coenocorypha huegeli* was named after Theodor von Heuglin (it was named after Baron Anatole von Hügel), and that the Antipodes Island snipe *C. aucklandica meinertzhagenae* was named after “the scurrilous Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen” (it was named after his unfortunate wife, the ornithologist Annie Meinertzhagen, as hinted at by the feminine ‘ae’ ending), whilst the ornithologist who named it, Walter Rothschild, is referred to as Lionel Rothschild on at least 6 occasions. The claim that the rifleman *Acanthisitta chloris* got its common name from “the khaki green tunic of the New Zealand Mounted Rifles of the First World War”, also cannot be correct, as the name had been in use since at least the 1870s (Buller 1873).

This book could and should have been a classic of New Zealand ornithological literature. If these corrections and amendments are implemented in the next edition, then this will justify my original expectations.

#### LITERATURE CITED

- Buller, W.L. 1873. *A history of the birds of New Zealand*. London: John van Voorst. xxiv + 384 pp.  
 Petyt, C. 1999. First record of a northern pintail (*Anas acuta*) in New Zealand. *Notornis* 46: 298-299.

COLIN MISKELLY  
 34 Hargreaves St.  
 Wellington 6021