

REVIEWS

New Zealand Albatrosses and Petrels — an identification guide, by Peter C. Harper and F. C. Kinsky. *Tuatara* 21 (1 & 2): 1-80, text-figs 17, pls 1-21, 1974. \$2.50.

This latest of several identification guides to New Zealand petrels is the best and the most ambitious. It aims to provide "seafarers and interested 'landlubbers'" with an "accurate, easy to use guide to the oceanic birds frequenting New Zealand waters." Actually, it deals only with Procellariiforms, but over a vast area — west to eastern Australia and Tasmania, north to New Caledonia, to 160°W in the Pacific and south to mainland Antarctica. In consequence, tropical gadfly petrels, some not on the New Zealand list, are included. Excluded are four of our rarer stragglers and the South Georgian Diving Petrel.

The contents are very well organised. An introduction gives outlines of typical petrels and their external features, lists "parameters" to look for when describing a petrel and what to do with banded or dead birds. There is a key based on categories reminiscent of those in Alexander's "Birds of the Ocean" which looks workable, but which this reviewer has not had the chance to test at sea. Then follow individual species' descriptions (35 to 330 words long) which include wing spans and body lengths (cm), field characters and modes of flight, distributions and breeding places. There are a number of good photographs, 21 pages of ink drawings, a short bibliography and an index to scientific names.

Much of the text is accurate, adequate for the purpose in hand, and some new information is included. There are very few typographical errors but among minor factual ones are occasional slips of the pen such as the statement that the nominate race of the Herald Petrel breeds in the Caribbean (confusion between Trinidad and South Trinidad Island?).

Attention needs to be drawn, however, to some more important deficiencies. For example, to describe mollymawks as having black upperwings, backs and tails is misleading. They may appear so at a distance (though the usually grey tails tend to be lost against a dull sea, as mollymawk spotters in the North Atlantic have found) but at closer quarters, as when following ships, most mollymawks are seen to have sooty brown upperwings, grey mantles shading into darker grey or brownish grey on the back. Their tails are grey (Godman 60 years ago described them as "hoary grey") but often acquire a brownish tinge, presumably with wear.

Harper and Kinsky follow the New Zealand "Checklist" in their nomenclature, hence the peculiar designation of the two giant petrels as subspecies despite sympatric breeding on at least three widely separated places. The statement that these birds cannot be identified at sea is not entirely correct, and the authors' descriptions are inaccurate.

Under good viewing conditions many adults can be identified using the characters set out by Bourne & Warham in 1966 (*Ardea* 54: 45-67) which have been substantiated by later work. Adult Northern Giant Petrels typically have dark grey or greyish-brown plumage, often with pale edges to the contour feathers, pale cheeks and foreheads and may be freckled whitish and grey on head, neck, throat and chest. Birds in this rather dark plumage with grey eyes are almost certainly *halli* because most, perhaps all, *giganteus* in similar plumage are dark eyed. Two of the birds in Figure 9 of the present booklet appear to be grey eyed and look like typical *halli* such as one sees in Cook Strait. The bill of *halli* is horn brown in colour, with a reddish or pinkish tinge along the ridge of the culmen and the upper nail and New Zealand birds often have dark marks on the inner aspects of both nails. Apart from white-phase examples, adult Southern Giant Petrels tend to be white headed and white necked, and *contra* Harper & Kinsky, often breed when brown eyed. Their bills are horn coloured with the culmen, and nails tinged greenish and lacking dark marks. These characters can often be picked out in adults although as yet it seems impossible to separate the dark-plumaged juveniles unless the bill tips are very clearly seen.

A major disappointment concerns the quality of some of the sketches. The outlines and "sit" of the birds are generally good, showing standardised upper and (often) lower views with tails closed and those of the gadfly petrels in particular are an improvement on sketches in previous guides. However, the shading is often crude: at the size of reproduction used, more precise detail and tonal gradation could have been shown. For example, Buller's Mollymawk on plate 5 appears to have a darker tail and back than wings whereas the reverse is true. The black trailing edge of the underwing is also too narrow and is much too narrow in the companion sketch of the Yellow-nosed Mollymawk, although the text states correctly that the underwings of these two birds are similar. In plate 6 the nigger-brown head of the Light-mantled Sooty Albatross is exaggerated, contrasting excessively with the back, and although the pale bill sulcus is shown, the broken eye-ring that forms an even more useful field character, is not. Few, if any *halli* giant petrels have white heads and faces as in sketch 11c. Again, the Grey Petrel appears to be black capped and although the dark undertail is shown and compares with the white undertail of the White-headed Petrel on the same page, this useful difference for separating the species even at a distance is not referred to in the text. Despite Peter Harper's expertise with this group, only three prions are figured: we might perhaps have expected sketches at least of the heads of the others, particularly as reference is made to a diagnostic white facial pattern in *Pachyptila belcheri*.

This, then, is not yet the definitive field guide to our petrels, but it does represent a distinct step forward and should certainly be in the library of all Australasian sea-bird enthusiasts.

J. W.

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NOTES & NEWS

CORRECTION

In the September *Notornis* review of Harper and Kinsky's *New Zealand Albatrosses and Petrels* it was stated that although the dark undertail of the Grey Petrel was shown in their sketch it was not referred to in their text. This is incorrect. On the contrary, the authors clearly emphasise on page 35 the value of the dark undertail coverts in identifying this bird in flight. This *lapsus calami* on the part of the reviewer is much regretted.

J. W.

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

At Kaikoura during the 1975-76 breeding season approximately 500 breeding pairs of Red-billed Gulls have been individually colour-marked. Would members of the Ornithological Society who sight these colour-marked gulls please send the combination, date and locality to:—

J. A. Mills,
Wildlife Service,
Department of Internal Affairs,
Wellington.

If any member is willing to search regularly for colour-marked gulls in their locality would they make contact at the address given for further particulars.

An example of how the band should be read:—

Gull Left Leg
Green over yellow
over Aluminium

Gull Right Leg
White