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ALBATROSSES, PETRELS AND SHEARWATERS OF THE WORLD. Derek Olney and Paul Scofield. 2007. London: Christopher Helm. 240 p, illustrated, soft cover. ISBN 978-0-7136-4332-9. £19.99. doi:10.1017/S0032247407006997

When Peter Harrison's book *Seabirds: an identification guide* was published by Croom Helm in 1983, it caused a minor sensation in the birdwatching world. For the first time, all the seabirds of the world were to be found illustrated and described in a single, relatively portable volume, with accurate distribution maps. Keen amateur ornithologists were made aware of the treasures to be found around the oceans of the planet, and many have since travelled to exotic and distant destinations in search of the many species of seabird that this book depicted.

Albatrosses, petrels and shearwaters of the world is the latest in a long line of first-class field guides from the excellent Helm publishing house, and seeks to improve our knowledge of this group of birds, the majority of which occur in the tropics or Southern Hemisphere. Have the authors achieved this aim?

The current book is a work dedicated to three families of seabirds, namely albatrosses, petrels, and shearwaters. The book begins with a list of the species and subspecies covered. There are 137 species recognised by the authors, and all are described and illustrated, with a distribution map for each. The authors then outline the taxonomic debate, and describe both the phylogenetic and biological species concepts well, pointing out the limitations of each, in terms that are sure to be understood by the general reader.

Since 1983, there have been significant advances in the study of seabirds. New species have been described, and birds previously considered subspecies have been promoted to specific status. The authors discuss these changes in taxonomy in their introduction. More importantly, advances in DNA analysis have led to changes in the taxonomic relationships between species. Although this is true for many bird families, nowhere has it been more so than for seabirds. For example, when I was a teenage birdwatcher in the 1970s, the field guides of the day only

described wandering albatross (*Diomedea exulans*). Now, we are informed that no fewer than six species of great albatross are recognised by most authorities.

One reason for the taxonomic changes may be that many species breed on remote islands that had been difficult for the researcher to access. Indeed, the Procellariiformes, which comprise the birds in this guide, are among the most enigmatic of birds and have drawn the increasing attention of birdwatchers and research workers during recent years. Much of this interest is due to the fact that for most of their lives, these birds are only to be found across the vast oceans of the planet, only coming to land in order to breed. As the authors state, most members of the general public are not aware of the existence of many of these species.

A historical background to the group is given, and we learn that the first petrels can be found in fossils aged between 40 and 45 million years old.

The next section describes the four groups that make up the species covered by this book. This is a well-written text and gives a good basic introduction to the species of the group.

I was interested to read that the wedge-rumped storm petrel (*Oceanodroma tethys*) was the only member of the storm petrels to visit its breeding burrow in the daytime. For all the others, night-time visits to the nest affords better protection from predation by larger seabirds. Of similar interest, we find that the sooty (*Puffinus griseus*) and short-tailed shearwaters (*P. tenuirostris*) are both able to reach up to 70 m below the surface of the sea in search of prey.

In a well-written section on identification, there are some useful guidelines for identifying a mystery seabird from this group. Pitfalls of identifying seabirds in different weather and lighting conditions are well covered and the observer is warned about this, and we are also presented with a discussion of the variability in the plumages that many of this group display. The relevance of moult in seabirds is also discussed.

I like the attitude that comes across in this book: that one cannot hope to identify all the seabirds one sees, and that if one doesn't know what species a bird was, it is safer for the scientific record not to guess.

A section on the conservation of this group of seabirds makes for bleak reading, with 10% of the species 'threatened with extinction in the near future.' The main reason put forward for this by the authors is predation of one form or other. There is interesting comment about the evidence of the use of seabirds as food resource by early Polynesian explorers as far back as 3000 years ago. The authors describe in some detail the damage inflicted on the seabird populations of the world by man since those early days. Non-human influence has also led to serious declines in seabirds that breed on offshore islands. The 'usual suspects' include introduced rats, pigs, and dogs.

Seabirds are also increasingly at risk when at sea, and the authors identify the well-known threats from drift nets and long-lining as being of major importance in

the decline of many seabird species. More worryingly, the authors speculate on the possible effects on seabirds of global warming. They highlight the submergence of breeding colonies under raised sea levels, and also the reduction in phytoplankton populations as a consequence of warmer sea temperatures. This section of the book ends on an optimistic note, however, with a brief discussion of how some of the above issues are being addressed, together with pointers as to how the individual birdwatcher may help.

The body of the book is contained in the 45 plates that depict all of the species, together with the accompanying text for each species. The plates are arranged in systematic order, on the right-hand page, with brief descriptions of the species on the page opposite. This is a well-trying and successful format, especially for a book designed to be used in the field. The majority of the birds are shown in flight, with a few images of birds on water. Confusion species are often shown together on the same plate, which helps in field identification.

On the whole, the plates are reasonable. Two points of criticism apply, however. Firstly, the style of the artist is too 'loose' for my liking. I prefer illustrations in identification guides to be more detailed. I realize this is a personal view and others may have a different opinion. The second criticism is much more important. The majority of the plates illustrate birds against a white background. For species with significant amounts of white in the plumage, this makes seeing the bird very difficult. For example, snowy albatross (*Diomedea exulans*), Figures 1a, 1d (Plate 1); southern royal albatross (*D. epomophora*), Figures 2a, 2c (Plate 1); and the fulmars (*Fulmarus* sp.), (Plate 12). The book would, in my opinion, be enhanced enormously if the artist had painted the birds against a non-white background. I also feel that the illustration of the waved albatross (*Phoebastria irrorata*), Figure 1a (Plate 5), looks a little light and is not an accurate representation of the species.

The detailed text for each species follows on from the plates, and sections cover taxonomy, distribution, behaviour, 'jizz,' size, plumage variations, moult and wear, and identification points. Happily, there is an accurate, up-to-date, and well-drawn distribution map for each species, which is a very helpful tool for assessing the likelihood of the bird you've just seen could actually be the one you think it is!

In the case of the Pacific storm petrels, we are informed that neither author has much field experience in this part of the world — an honest approach — and that the texts for species in this part of the world were difficult to prepare. They suggest that more care and attention is needed in identifying white-rumped storm petrels photographed in places such as the Galapagos. I, for one, will now be re-examining my own photographs to confirm identification, based on the information in this book.

Overall, this book is a very good attempt to represent the known extant seabirds in these groups, and is up to date. For example, the recent rediscovery of the New

Zealand storm petrel (*Pealeornis maoriana*), which had been presumed extinct, is covered. Interestingly, this species was identified from digital photographs taken at sea on a pelagic trip — the authors quite rightly pointing out the importance of obtaining photographs of seabirds as a means of confirming identification.

For many of the seabirds described in this guide, the birdwatcher is often given only the briefest of glimpses, as the bird zooms past a boat, in a sea that is anything other than flat calm. The advent of digital photography has helped enormously — something the authors emphasise. However they rightly make the point that a photograph can only be one part of the observation of a seabird and that photography does not replace field craft — the observation by eye of the bird and the recording of contemporaneous field notes — a skill that has, it seems, declined over the years.

The authors are at pains to point out that as time goes on and more research is undertaken, the position in terms of number of species and their relationships may well change. However, for a representation of the current position, this is an admirable effort. It is a compact volume, and although not really pocket-sized, could easily accompany the birdwatcher on pelagic trips or cruises.

Harrison's book generated a hunger amongst bird-watchers to get to know more about seabirds, and the book reviewed here represents a major step forward in knowledge about the pelagic seabirds of the world. With the reservations outlined above in mind, I have no hesitation in recommending this volume to all birdwatchers and seabird workers. (Kevin Elsby, Chapel House, Bridge Road, Colby, Norwich NR11 7EA.)

Reference

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THE COLDEST CRUCIBLE: ARCTIC EXPLORATION AND AMERICAN CULTURE. Michael F. Robinson. 2006. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. xii + 206 p, illustrated, hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-226-72184-2. US\$39.00. doi:10.1017/S0032247407007000

Guided by previous scholarship that engaged the rich social and institutional contexts of exploration, Michael Robinson turns the frame of focus away from the north toward its domestic audience, in a timely and resonant attempt to consider the cultural importance of the Arctic itself. From the outset, Robinson pays particular attention to what may be called the 'culture' of exploration, to the competing demands placed upon explorers by a range of public audiences, the struggles to build support for expeditions before departure and to defend claims upon their return, and the ongoing efforts of explorers to cast themselves as individuals worthy of the nation's full attention. The Arctic became a stage for the performance of strident patriotism as well as becoming a platform for