

BIRDS OF THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS, ALASKA

Gibson, D.D. & Byrd, G.V. 2007. Cambridge, MA, & Washington, DC: Nuttall Ornithological Club & The American Ornithologists' Union. 351 pp. Hardcover. ISBN-13: 9780943610733. US\$40.

Birds of the Aleutian Islands, Alaska is a monumental work on the avifauna of the most obscure, remote and poorly known corner of the United States—the Aleutian Islands. This windy island group, located off the edge of most maps, stretches 1800 km from east to west and ranges from 51 to 55 degrees latitude in the North Pacific between Alaska and Russia, much more southerly than most people realize. This is not a coffee table book on Alaskan birds, not a field guide, nor a travel guide or guide to Aleutian birding locations, nor does it emphasize marine birds. It is a comprehensive, exhaustively researched, rigorously produced and edited ornithological monograph on all Aleutian birds, a data summary and repository listing records and specimens, with a Discussion section analyzing biogeographic patterns of occurrence.

The introductory chapter begins with a brief history of avifaunal investigations in the Aleutians, mentioning notables including Steller, Cook, Merck, Voznesenski, Clark, Bent, Gabrielson and Murie, among other recorders of Aleutian natural history. Although brief, this section is very dense and cites all significant historical references as far as I can tell. (The Literature Cited section contains 466 references!) Additional introductory sections cover land status (currently, most Aleutian Islands are within the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge), geology and physical characteristics, small maps on one page, and biologic characteristics including vegetation, fish, mammals, climate and habitats used by birds.

The species accounts cover 271 species and an additional 28 subspecies, with occurrence documented by specimens (89%) and archived or published photographs (9%). The accounts are dense, detailed and data-rich (emphasizing dates of occurrence), and written in telegraphic style to summarize each species' status. Most people will not find this light reading, but rather a mass of information on each species' occurrence in the most concise form possible. Seabirds receive the same treatment as other birds. For example, the account for the iconic Whiskered Auklet *Aethia pygmaea* fills only a single page, starting with estimates of numbers breeding in various island groups, going on to timing of breeding, then to winter distribution, then to a brief discussion of habitats used, and finishing off with some conservation-oriented notes concerning vulnerability to introduced foxes and attraction to vessel lights. For seabirds in general, the accounts provide up-to-date information on distribution, population estimates and status. The authors have obviously meticulously researched the occurrence of migrants and vagrants, to provide the most accurate annotated source possible for rare species. However, breeding species and winter residents are covered in greater detail than migrants—with extensive notes on breeding species' distribution, habitat and historical changes in abundance, and notes on taxonomy where required. Extra coverage is also given to species whose status is in doubt or if errors in previous publications and specimen labels have confused matters. For species that have markedly declined (e.g. terns) or increased (e.g. Aleutian Cackling Goose *Branta hutchinsii leucopareia*), discussion of evidence for population change and possible causes is presented. For anyone interested in bird conservation, this treatment makes the book an accurate, well-balanced and essential single source for information on the population status of Aleutian

birds. For others, the volume of information may be overwhelming; however, in looking for the last word on status of a particular species, this book will be the place to go.

A 16-page section in the center of the book contains 32 color photographs with short captions. These photographs are of high quality and emphasize habitat, rather than being portraits of notable bird species. The scenes give the reader a representative impression of Aleutian habitats—important for such a poorly known area. Seabirds are not emphasized here, but there are nice images of Tufted *Fratercula cirrhata* and Horned *F. corniculata* Puffins at colonies, a Whiskered Auklet flock at sea, a spectacular shearwater flock, and a nest site for a Kittlitz's Murrelet *Brachyramphus brevirostris*. The only theme I would have added here is a few more winter scenes to illustrate the conditions faced by resident species.

Following the species accounts, a Discussion section provides an analysis of the data provided by the accounts, emphasizing biogeography and factors determining the timing of occurrence, including 15 tables to elucidate patterns. Little emphasis is given to seabirds in this section, which begins with a descriptive review of the taxonomic composition of the Aleutian avifauna (i.e. distribution of the 299 taxa covered among avian orders and major guilds), supported by a table showing the number and percent of species in each group occurring annually or less than annually. Then the proximate (geographic) origins of Aleutian birds are reviewed, followed by a section covering timing and other characteristics of seasonal movement and breeding (Table 3 in this latter section will be of interest to birders because it summarizes the migration timing of regularly occurring vagrants). Next, the authors review bird distribution within the archipelago, emphasizing the distinctiveness of the eastern Aleutians (proximate to North American mainland) and western Aleutians (nearer to Asia). The discussion finishes off with a review of the avifaunal composition of each habitat, and “biological habitat changes,” emphasizing the effect of foxes, rats and other mammals introduced by humans to islands previously free of terrestrial mammals. Given the role of Vernon Byrd in tackling that issue, this section is remarkably short at less than one page, but it is well referenced. One suspects this topic may be expanded for a future book perhaps?

Birds of the Aleutian Islands, Alaska finishes with detailed appendixes cataloguing the 8000 avian specimens collected in the Aleutians between 1827 and 2006 (a pet project of the senior author), the hypothetical list of species not documented by specimens or acceptable photographs, and a detailed gazetteer of the archipelago.

Although this book does not emphasize seabirds, it is a must for seabird biologists working in or near the Aleutians and more widely in the North Pacific region. Biologists concerned with island conservation and biogeography, naturalists focused on northwestern North America, and birders looking for continental coverage will also want to pick this one up—and at US\$40, it is a bargain.

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