

BOOK REVIEWS

Albatrosses, Petrels, and Shearwaters of the World, by Derek Onley and Paul Scofield. 2007. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. 240 pages, 45 color plates, range maps. Paperback, \$29.95. ISBN-13: 978-0-691-13132-0.

Albatrosses and petrels, often referred to collectively as tubenoses, are among the most remarkable of birds, living as they do in the marine environment where human beings are little more than occasional, almost alien, visitors. Because of the difficulties in simply viewing tubenoses at sea, and because many species look similar, these birds pose many identification challenges. Peter Harrison's classic *Seabirds: An Identification Guide*, published in 1983, and his follow-up photographic guide published in 1987, kindled the nascent pelagic dreams of land-based birders. Today it is easy to criticize Harrison's books for some clunky illustrations and errors, but they were genuine contributions that set the stage for subsequent progress. Almost 25 years later a new guide to these birds' identification worldwide would be welcome. Is this book (hereafter APSW) a worthy successor to Harrison? Has it incorporated what has been learned and published in the past 20 years?

Tubenoses are arguably my favorite birds, and of the 135 extant species covered in APSW I have seen all but eight at sea. I had the opportunity this spring to use a pre-publication copy of the book on a voyage from New Zealand to Japan, and have just returned from two weeks of pelagic trips off North Carolina, where I received more feedback about APSW.

The book begins with a list of the species and subspecies of the world's tubenoses, with reference to the plates on which they are illustrated. Species split here include the Gray-faced Petrel (*Pterodroma gouldi*) from the Great-winged (*P. macroptera*), the Trinidad Petrel (*Pterodroma arminjoniana*) from the Herald (*P. heraldica*), and the Macaronesian (*Puffinus baroli*) and Galapagos (*P. subalaris*) shearwaters from Audubon's (*P. lherminieri*). The preface and acknowledgments are followed by a short discussion of taxonomy and species concepts, an overview of the four traditional tubenose families, and sections on identification, conservation, and how to use the book. Then come the plates with facing captions, followed by species accounts with maps. A single page of references and an index round out the book, which is small enough to fit in a large jacket pocket.

The introduction is written in an informal style that should be accessible to anyone. The discussion of identification includes useful tips about lighting, wind conditions, molt, and, especially, the effects of plumage wear and fading; surprisingly, there is no discussion of the birds' shape, which is a fundamental step in tubenose identification. Measurements have been taken from various sources rather than by the authors, and no size ranges are given, even for species with appreciable sexual dimorphism. On p. 19 we are told that "In this guide we concentrate on the identification of birds in flight," a focus unfortunately narrow because albatrosses and shearwaters are often seen at rest on the water, where they pose further identification challenges. The section on conservation is sobering, but no citations are provided so one cannot follow up on information reported. That the conservation section is almost as long as the identification section suggests that some motivation for the book came from a desire to increase public appreciation and conservation awareness about these wonderful birds. This is commendable, but it is somewhat ironic that this book is far less rigorous in its execution than the conservation-driven taxonomy it criticizes (pp. 12–13).

The acknowledgments of APSW "accept that any inaccuracies here are our own. We would love to hear from anyone...who disagrees with us and welcome a vigorous debate." At the bottom of p. 30 the authors further note that "this book is [in] no way the final word on seabird identification but intended to promote open discussion and an exchange of information, preferably of a friendly and enthusiastic nature over cups of tea or a beer or two." Peer review prior to publication would have been more

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desirable than such disclaimers, however, as would have been extensive experience at sea with most species treated and a serious attempt to synthesize relevant literature. This book, like so many guides to bird families these days, seems to have been produced largely in a vacuum.

Good illustrations are critical for species identification. I like Derek Onley's illustrations in *The Hand Guide to the Birds of New Zealand* (H. Robertson and B. Heather, 1999, Penguin Books, Auckland, New Zealand), including the tubenoses. His wash paintings and semi-impressionistic style worked well for an avifauna without too many identification challenges, and he often captured the shapes of various petrels and shearwaters. By contrast, the paintings in APSW are disappointing (exacerbated by insipid printing in my copy). In part this may be due to Onley's lack of familiarity with many of the species, but such a lack does not explain why most figures are stiff and misproportioned. In fact, in the New Zealand guide the very same species have better shapes (e.g., Buller's Shearwater). I am often unable to identify a painting to species without consulting the facing captions to see what it is supposed to be, and the book also employs user-unfriendly labels (such as 5a, 5b, 5c, etc.), which slow the flow of information. On plate 16, Murphy's Petrel is shown as ashy gray overall whereas Solander's (Providence) Petrel is dark brown, except for a small figure of the latter that is also ashy gray (allegedly this is a bird in worn plumage—but then it should look darker and browner, not paler and grayer, as the authors themselves explain in the introduction). Anyone who has ever seen storm-petrels off the California coast might look at plate 42 and discard the book immediately (e.g., the Black Storm-Petrel does not have a tail fork deeper than the Markham's). Only one of the 13 Trinidad Petrels I saw off North Carolina looked much like any illustration in APSW, and even the plate showing the Sooty and Short-tailed shearwaters fails to capture the character of these birds.

How about the text? The very first page I opened and scanned happened to be p. 130, where we are told that Short-tailed Albatross is a "rare northeast Pacific breeder," and the map shows Hawaii as part of the breeding range. Yet this species breeds in the *western* Pacific, and it has never been confirmed breeding in Hawaii. This type of carelessness typifies the book. The range maps are often plain wrong, to the degree that I wondered if the maps were simply mismatched in many accounts. Waters off western Middle America are not mapped for species as regular there as the Wedge-tailed and Galapagos shearwaters or the Tahiti Petrel; Markham's Storm-Petrel allegedly occurs throughout the Gulf of California, the Black Storm-Petrel far offshore in the eastern tropical Pacific! West-coast birders will be surprised to see that the Flesh-footed Shearwater occurs only far offshore in the Gulf of Alaska and not farther south along North America's west coast. The mapped range of the Trinidad Petrel is restricted to the South Atlantic (although the text says "regularly seen off North Carolina"), whereas Fea's Petrel is mapped off North Carolina (although it is rarer there than the Trinidad Petrel). Some map layouts are also flawed: inexplicably, the maps for the Mottled Petrel and Short-tailed Shearwater, among other Pacific species, are centered on the Atlantic Ocean so that the ranges are unhelpfully split into two parts on the left and right sides of the map. The maps in Harrison's 1983 work may be more accurate overall and also helpfully note seasonality.

The accounts of behavior betray that the authors have little if any experience of seabirds in the northern hemisphere or Atlantic Ocean. The accounts for North American species thus lack first-hand descriptions of flight manner or comparisons between similar species. The Ashy Storm-Petrel (p. 235) allegedly "uses feet to push off sea surface and make rapid changes of direction," something I have never seen in any species of *Oceanodroma* storm-petrel. The discussions of identification are careless and often unhelpful. For example, we are told that the Galapagos Shearwater may occur in the same waters as the Tropical Shearwater (*Puffinus [ballionii] dichrous*) off Mexico, yet neither is mapped there. On p. 234, the periods of wing molt of the Black and Markham's storm-petrels are said to be the same (July to October), yet on

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p. 233 we are told that Markham's probably undergoes wing molt in the southern spring and summer. No serious attempt was made to check the literature for North America or the Atlantic Ocean. For example, the egg dates given for Fea's Petrel refer only to the population on the Desertas Islands, not to the nominate subspecies on the Cape Verde Islands; the New Jersey record of Buller's Shearwater is noted, but not the California record of the Great-winged Petrel.

Other than offering an updated taxonomy relative to Harrison's guides, *Albatrosses, Petrels, and Shearwaters of the World* contributes little to help observers in North America identify tubenoses. I recently learned that one friend and colleague from the Atlantic coast, who has written extensively on tubenoses in North American waters, had eagerly ordered the book but, on seeing a copy, wrote and canceled his order! Your money would be better put toward going on a pelagic trip and enjoying the birds themselves.

Steve N. G. Howell