

Book Review

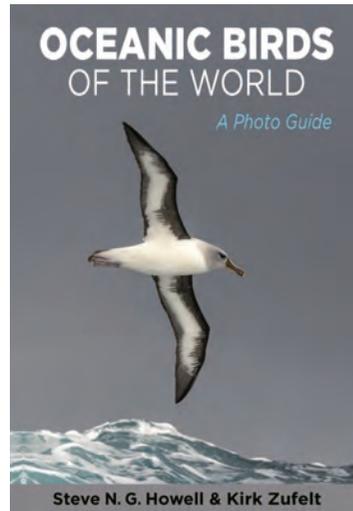
Oceanic Birds of the World: A Photo Guide

STEVE N. G. HOWELL AND KIRK ZUFELT, 2019

Princeton University Press, Princeton US and Oxford UK, US\$35/£30

Paperback, 358 pages, ISBN 9780691175010

368 plates, 2200 photographs, 114 distribution maps



This book combines Steve Howell's encyclopaedic knowledge of seabirds with the skills of one of the world's leading seabird photographers, Kirk Zufelt. The result is a path-breaking work on the identification and distribution of oceanic birds.

The book covers what the authors consider to be 'true seabirds': 'birds that make their living from the ocean for all or most of the year'; not 'seaside' birds. The families included are penguins, alcids, petrels, diving petrels, albatrosses, storm petrels, tropicbirds, frigatebirds, gannets and boobies, skuas and jaegers, and phalaropes (two species). Gulls are limited to the four oceanic species, and terns to three oceanic species plus noddies and ternlets. The coverage is therefore narrower than Harrison's (1983) classic *Seabirds: An Identification Guide*, but it compensates for that by incorporating most post-Harrison taxonomic research and distribution knowledge.

Most seabird taxonomy is still in a state of flux, so the authors rightly do not attempt to resolve outstanding issues but alert the reader to their existence. To that end they employ the concept of a species complex: a group of closely related *taxa* that may represent distinct species. For example, the Wilson's Storm Petrel complex consists of

Wilson's Storm Petrel familiar to Australian pelagic birders, Fuegian Storm Petrel of southern Chile and the Humboldt current, Pincoya Storm Petrel found mainly in the Chilean fjords, Elliot's Storm Petrel off northern Chile and the coast of Peru, and Lowe's Storm Petrel, a resurrected name for the form of Elliot's Storm Petrel found in the Galapagos.

The book is replete with thousands of photographs of exceptional quality, almost all taken by Kirk Zufelt. Each taxon usually has a page consisting of two parts: an at-sea distribution map with breeding locations, and a selection of photographs showing dorsal and ventral views. The authors warn the reader that the at-sea distribution of many species is poorly known so the maps should be interpreted with caution. The photographs are annotated with key identification features. Most of this identification information is relatively new so it will prove invaluable to all pelagic birders. That does not mean, of course, that every bird can be identified at sea, and the authors consistently stress the difficulties that arise with some taxa.

The coverage is global so many of the taxa are unlikely to appear in Australian, let alone South Australian, waters. However, South Australian

pelagic birders will find much of relevance, especially the treatment of the Wandering Albatross complex, the White-faced Storm Petrel complex, and the prions.

The coverage of the Wandering Albatross complex allocates 10 pages and over 60 photographs to the plumage progression, moult and ageing of Wandering Albatross. Species of the complex regularly recorded in South Australian waters have been Snowy Wandering Albatross and Gibson's Wandering Albatross. Other taxa such as Antipodean Wandering Albatross and Gough (Tristan) Wandering Albatross have not been recorded but are possible. The movements of Gough Wanderers are not well known but most Antipodean Wanderers disperse east of New Zealand to waters off Chile, so are less likely to be encountered in South Australian waters.

The treatment of prions is also of interest to South Australian pelagic birders as they sometimes appear in large numbers in waters off the South East of the state. In view of the difficulty of identifying prions, even in the hand, many listers will be concerned to discover that a familiar species such as the Fairy Prion may consist of a complex comprising at least two species: Northern and Subantarctic Fairy Prion. The authors also include a comprehensive coverage of MacGillivray's Prion, newly discovered on Gough Island in the Atlantic and formerly thought to occur only on St Paul and Amsterdam Islands in the Indian Ocean. MacGillivray's Prion sits between Salvin's Prion and Broad-billed Prion which makes for an identification challenge if that is based solely on bill dimensions. Identification may however be supported by plumage features that the authors suggest. It will certainly pose a challenge for Australian pelagic sea-birders that I am sure some will be keen to take on.

Another complex of interest to South Australians is the White-faced Storm Petrel. In our region there are three taxa identified with new English

names: Australian, Latham's and Kermadec. Latham's breeds on New Zealand islands and extends into the South Pacific, the Kermadec breeds on the Kermadec Islands north of New Zealand, and the Australian breeds on islands off southern Australia and extends into the Indian Ocean during the non-breeding season. There are subtle differences between these taxa that will challenge many observers, but it seems unlikely that Australians will take up the new name for the taxon commonly seen off southern Australia.

Finally, that leads to what I think is the importance of this book. It challenges a lot of conventional thinking without being dogmatic. As the authors regularly point out, there is much we do not know about oceanic birds so there is a lot still to learn. This book is a first step on that journey and pelagic sea-birders will find it an invaluable resource.

REFERENCE

Harrison, P. 1983. *Seabirds: an Identification Guide*. Revised edition, 1989. Christopher Helm, London.

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