

BOOK REVIEW

SEABIRDS : AN IDENTIFICATION GUIDE by Peter Harrison, 1983. Australia : A.H. & A.W. Reed; United Kingdom : Croom Helm. Pp 448, col. pl. 88, many b & w drawings. \$35.

This is a monumental field guide both in terms of quantity and quality. It is not surprising that it took the author eleven years to produce, yet it is up-to-date. Peter Harrison wrote the text and painted the 1600 plates, almost all of the latter based on observation of living birds.

Field guides are often based either on a region or a taxon. This guide is based on neither, but rather on a major and widespread habitat. Harrison's first problem must have been to decide what is a seabird. His

commonsense answer (p.13) is that, "Seabirds are . . . those species whose normal habitat and food source is the sea". However, this leaves him with certain grey areas and with the embarrassment of including odd species from some groups. It also leads to the inclusion of over three hundred species and this means that this book is not a pocket guide, especially in the rather rigorous conditions under which most of us do our seabirding! Its coverage is, if anything, 'generous', in that it includes, for example, line drawings of "sea-ducks". When all is said and done the problem of coverage is insoluble and Harrison's approach is pragmatic and sensible.

It is a well-structured guide. After the formalities, which include a Foreword by Roger

Tory Peterson, there are useful short sections on abbreviations, topography of a seabird, general identification and recording of birds at sea. A glossary is also included. These sections are well-written and are at times very helpful in using the rest of the book. The 88 plates, with brief descriptions on the facing page, are all grouped together, and are well cross-referenced to the main body of the text, where considerable detail is supplied in a very systematic fashion. All plumages are described and most are illustrated; where appropriate, for example the Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*, the morphological complexity of subspecific variation is not avoided.

The author has avoided the temptation to include ecological information except where it specifically relates to identification of species, subspecies, age or sex. The book is none the worse for this discipline. Each Family and genus is introduced briefly, but again it is almost exclusively for identification purposes, and in this sense the book has some of the features of a good key. For identification purposes the text is exhaustive and a very useful feature is the discussion of similar species. This helps one to know what to look out for and is a good substitute for the rather vague arrows and the like which clutter the plates of some field guides. Each species is also described under, 'Flight, habits and jizz' and it is here that the author's surely unparalleled field experience is so important. (It is stated that he has field experience of all but 30 of the 312 species.) The British term 'jizz' is a curious one and Harrison gets into a tangle in his half-page attempt to explain the term (p.20). Despite this failure, his notes under 'jizz' are often more important than the precise morphological notes. Such is the art of bird identification. In contrast to this, some of the plates do not capture 'jizz' and in fact a small number are almost absurd. For example, some of the Storm Petrels, Plates 33-37, look more like pigeons than the delicate little swallow-like creatures which we know them to be. However, the plates are in general excellent, being both accurate and at times pleasing, and more technical points are often picked up in the line drawings, for example the distinctive underwing of the Northern Royal Albatross *Diomedea epomophora sanfordi* at page 224.

A pleasing feature for local ornithologists is the warm tribute to John Cox's work at page 251, where the author introduces the genus *Pachyptila* (prions). I must quote, "Formerly treated as five or six species. His taxon [*sic*] is

followed in this guide (in anticipation of wider acceptance by progressive birders) and his paper is strongly recommended for further reading". This illustrates Harrison's eclecticism and, I believe, his scholarship since John's paper, published in the *Records of the South Australian Museum*, is perhaps not easily obtained by some readers. One of the great advantages of Harrison's scholarship is that he is familiar with Australian and New Zealand literature and therefore tends to treat the taxonomy of the Procellariiformes in a way familiar to Southern Hemisphere readers; thus, we are *not* treated to the oddities of some recent Northern Hemisphere texts, which fail to recognize the two species of Giant Petrel or even the two species of *Phoebetria* albatrosses. It seems that either caution or time or both prevented Harrison from including the absolutely latest taxonomic breakthrough, the Amsterdam Albatross *Diomedea amsterdamensis* described in the *R.A.O.U. Newsletter* of December 1983.

A world distribution map is provided for every species at the back of the book and the enormous range of many of them makes it difficult to provide detail. The maps are clear, not too misleading, and, like all maps, save a lot of words.

All in all this is a remarkable book, both in its coverage and its quality. Seabirding is relatively new as a popular branch of bird-watching and we in the Southern Hemisphere are very fortunate in our access to many seabird groups. There is a rapidly expanding interest in seabirds as the existence of the R.A.O.U. Seabird Group shows. This guide is a worthy successor in the line which stretches back to Alexander's *Birds of the Ocean*. It won the 1983 *British Birds* "Book of the Year" award and while it may seem a rather gratuitous comment, I can think of no better field guide to a significant group of birds. It should make seabirding a much more interesting and rewarding pursuit for years to come. As was once said of *Birds of the Ocean*, "No-one should go to sea without it".

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