

# Albatrosses.

**TERENCE LINDSEY 2008**

*CSIRO Publishing. Softback, 152 pages, 16 pages of colour photographs. \$A39.95.*

The author has determined to write a popular life history and biology of the albatrosses by distilling down the very large scientific literature on the subject whilst giving due recognition to the principal researchers. The book is aimed at a wider audience beyond the keen seabirder. There are chapters on myth and legend, taxonomy, Southern Ocean environment, food and foraging, flight, courtship, the nesting cycle and human impacts. The appendix has two tables, one of species, sub-species and their main breeding islands, the other of average biometrics and population numbers obtained from various sources. About 250 selected references are listed and cover the most important research papers on albatrosses of the past thirty years. The author writes in a very readable style without 'dumbing down' the complex subject.

His enthusiasm and passion for this impressive and extraordinary group of birds inspires the reader. His ultimate accolades are quite rightly reserved for the Wandering Albatross, the largest and best known of the group and appropriately this is the 'flagship' species in the book. When considering albatross taxonomy, views of both the traditional 'lumpers' and the radical 'splitters' are explained and wisely a neutral position is maintained throughout. In the chapter on human impacts the very real danger to albatross populations posed by deep sea fishing operations is highlighted. Various remedies to reduce the slaughter have been taken but as yet the impact of these is still being assessed.

Lower case is used for albatross names in the main part of the book, however it lacks consistency in the capitalisation of names in the appendix tables. There are problems with lower case when used for compound bird names and most birders prefer capitalisation. Presumably the book was obliged to comply with a corporate style manual.

The book for the most part seems to have few errors. Kerguelen is on or just north of the Antarctic Convergence (oceanic Antarctic Polar Front) not 'well to the south'. To say that most of the islands of the Southern Ocean are as tiny as the illustrated Middle Sister of the Chatham group is misleading, all the significant islands are much larger. The addition of a basic chart of the Southern Ocean showing the main breeding islands and the oceanic fronts would have been helpful. The term 'mollymawk' did not originate in New Zealand although it is in general use there for the smaller albatrosses. It is an old seafaring term for the Northern Fulmar coming from the Dutch 'mallemok' or 'mallemucke' and was first known in literature in 1694. The name probably came to New Zealand with whalers and sealers who were the first European settlers.

The colour photographic plates are to an extent a disappointment. With the exception of the cover photographs and a few others, many appear to have come from a bygone era. In this age of digital SLR photography with auto focus and image stabilising there are many superb albatross photographs available from seabird enthusiasts, researchers and professional wildlife photographers. The book would have benefited if a wider net had been cast for photographs. Three of the photographs carry over two pages, never a good idea with the distortion of the join. Page 33 shows almost featureless, slightly out of focus dark blue ocean, and whilst there may be some aesthetic reason for having this

opposite the flight picture of a 'Wanderer' on the joining page, it is a waste of a colour plate.

The book will appeal to 'seabirders' who have not had time to keep up with albatross studies dispersed throughout many scientific journals from around the world. Other birders will find much of interest in this account as will a more general readership. It would be a useful addition to municipal and senior school libraries.

**Neil Cheshire**