

Book Reviews

Albatrosses Their World, Their Ways.

**TUI DE ROY, MARK JONES AND
JULIAN FITTER 2009**

*CSIRO Publishing. 232 pages, lavishly illustrated
with photographs. \$79.95.*

There are two general reasons why a book review can be difficult to write. One is that the book may be poor and the reviewer, often a generous individual, may struggle to say anything positive about the book. The other is that the book is so good that one has to struggle not to write an absolute eulogy and risk being accused of being paid or being related to the author. This book falls into this latter category. It is simply excellent in everything that it does. All one can do is to query its structure and perhaps its niche in the market. It looks at first like a coffee-table book with all that that implies. It is not a field guide, it is not a monograph and it is not a lyrical poetical celebration of this wonderful group of birds. It is all three of these, but it does all three things superbly well, but being a compendium it is rather large and not cheap.

Given the subject matter it is perhaps curious that all three authors are Europeans, though in fairness they have spent much time in other more Albatross rich locations. For example all three have lived and worked in the Galapagos Islands for many years. One can imagine that this would do much to enthuse one about nature and natural things.

The book is very much in three parts, indeed it is almost three books in one. Part One with a single author is entitled *Spirit of the Oceans Wild*, and is an evocation of albatrosses, but each chapter is based on a single species or a group of allied species. It is well written, full of relevant facts and backed by superb photographs. This is a book that pays full homage to the new digital photography age but despite its large format it occasionally falls for the mistake of taking a wonderful photograph across the double page, but that is just a peccadillo. Albatrosses are worthy of our more lyrical view of nature and Tui De Roy does them proud and captures the distinctive essence of each of the species or groups.

Part Two edited by Mark Jones is multi-authored and entitled *Science and Conservation*. Once again facts and wonderful photographs combine to capture the many threats to these birds and the editor has mustered most of the best albatross authorities, for example, Rosemary Gales, John Croxall, Chris Robertson and Paul Scofield to name just a few. To this reader at least, there is a pleasing evenness of style and balance, even though the topics and authors are diverse; good editing I think!

For me Part Three was a surprise after Parts One and Two. I did not expect an excellent species by species field guide. If this part alone had been published as a short field-guide (maybe a thought here for the future), it would have been an excellent one. It is many years since the huge leap to Harrison's *Seabirds*, and even the recent Onley and Scofield, the latter author represented in this book, is probably no better

as a species guide, though it is more portable and covers much more than just albatrosses. The use of photographs and maps is highly efficient and errors seem few and trivial. Of course the albatross section of Shirihai's *The Complete Guide to Antarctic Wildlife* is also excellent, but it is confined to southern species alone. Here we have them all.

All in all this is the complete albatross book and does full justice to these greatest and for some people ultimate birds. It will not be easily supplanted and while one could query the taxonomy and albatross taxonomy is very fraught and indeed almost political at times. (Australians will perhaps find it a little New Zealand orientated).

However, whatever judgments are made about albatross taxonomy and lineage, they remain one of the wonders of the natural world. Long may it remain so. If you agree and/or perhaps are not able to see them in their own world, then go out and buy this book. It is not a coffee-table book. It is a book to refer to and to treasure for a long time.

John Hatch