

ORNITHOLOGY

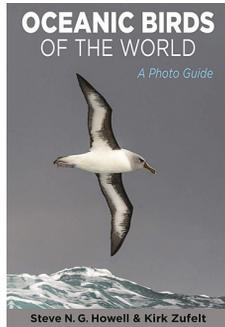
Oceanic Birds of the World: A Photo Guide

By Steve N.G. Howell and Kirk Zufelt. 2019. Princeton University Press. 359 pages, 106 maps, and 2200 colour photos, 35.00 USD, Cloth.

Seabird-watching is a distinctive sub-genre of birding. Those who indulge must either suffer the discomforts of long hours on some wind and rain-swept headland, staring out to sea, or the threat of seasickness in a small wave-tossed boat. We commoners can only dream of having a royal yacht for our seabirding platform, as Prince Philip did back in the day when the Crown still owned *Britannia* (H.R.H. Duke of Edinburgh, *Birds from Britannia*, 1962).

Uncomfortable as the pursuit of seabirds may be, it has many exponents, and none so dedicated as the authors of this book. I seldom reach for superlatives, but I think the word monumental would not be out of place for this amazing collection of seabird photographs, covering not only every species and plumage, but a variety of angles and poses for each. The Wandering Albatross (*Diomedea exulans* complex), for example, here treated as five ‘species’ (Snowy, Gough, Gibson’s, Antipodes, and Amsterdam), is illustrated by ten plates comprising no less than 92 individual pictures, covering every conceivable age and morph of a species that changes plumage through six cycles. The sheer complexity is daunting and the fact that these peripatetic birds may overlap throughout the southern oceans means that identifications to species outside of their segregated breeding islands can be extremely challenging.

The importance of the word “Oceanic” in the title needs to be stressed. This is a book to identify birds seen far offshore: strictly coastal species, such as cormorants, most gulls, and many terns are not included. This is a slight drawback for those watching birds in inshore waters because, while this tome is ideal for identifying shearwaters and petrels, there are many



species that you may see on the continental shelf for which you will need a standard field guide. So this is not a one-stop shop for those going to watch birds at sea. Moreover, the authors assume that the only way to see oceanic birds away from their breeding sites is by going out on a boat, thus ignoring the noble activity of seawatching (called seawatching because you mostly just see the sea) performed from many headlands in Europe and North America and where many of the species featured in this book appear regularly.

I was happy to read in the section How to Use this Book: “It is realistic ... to accept that many birds at sea get away as unidentified, and that quite a few species (such as cryptic storm-petrel taxa) are not known to be safely identifiable in the field”; and “In some cases it is better to describe distribution by habitat and region rather than to imply false precision with maps” (pp. 8–9). Not everyone recognises such limitations but even the best observers, perhaps especially the best observers, understand the limitations of current knowledge of oceanic birds. Many views, especially of ‘difficult’ species, such as Short-tailed and Sooty Shearwater (*Ardenna grisea*, *Ardenna tenuirostris*), must be filed as genus species.

I had a few reservations. The provision of maps is not comprehensive: only two genera of auks, one gull, and five terns qualify and there are no maps for phalaropes. There is no obvious reason for the exclusions. Moreover, quite a few tern pictures show birds perched on the ground or on water—hardly ever seen when you are offshore. These are just quibbles, though. The text is delightfully brief and to the point and the illustrations, many of which combine photos of similar species on the same background, mimicking the colour plates of a more typical field guide, are fantastic. Anyone who plans to seawatch or take a pelagic birding trip needs this guide.

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