

Petrels, Albatrosses and Storm Petrels of North America

By Steve N. G. Howell. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540-5237 USA. 493 pages. 45.00 USD. Cloth.

I spent 18 days at sea during December 2011 and the first half of January 2012. Of those seven were in the North Atlantic. The rest were in the South Atlantic and South Pacific. Thus I was faced with identifying many species of tubenoses on most days. This was a daunting [terrifying?] task, in part because of a lack of information.

Steve Howell's book aims to fill that knowledge gap; or at least try to. What caught my eye first was a section on field identification. In particular two photos of Buller's Shearwater; one showing the classic "W" wing pattern and the other a more uniform brown bird. I have a photo of me holding such a brown bird, caught off Alaska two years ago, as I puzzled with its identification. I did identify it eventually by its underwing pattern, but not before a lot of grief. Howell goes on to show how fog and light affect to colours we see. One fascinating pair of photos show the same bird, a juvenile White-faced Storm-Petrel, taken a few minutes apart, after the light changed. One is distinctly grubbier and browner, the other greyer and whiter. So apart from viewing conditions there are species differences, colour phases and moult to resolve. And you have to deal with these issues while swaying around and holding binoculars steady in the wind.

Starting back at the beginning Howell introduces us to tubenoses and the ocean's they live in. There is a detailed review of the current taxonomic knowledge and then, the excellent section on field identification. The author provides a short section on how to see tubenoses and seabird conservation. The bulk of the book is given over to the species accounts.

Each species has notes on the taxonomy, the origin of the names and the status. For some there is a range map, with migration patterns overlaid. The majority of the text is on species identification. This is covered in impressive detail and is accompanied by numerous photographs. Similar species photographs are also included, eliminating the annoying need to flip back and forth. Birds are shown sitting on the water and in flight and some museum specimens are shown for comparison. Is the text accurate? Quite frankly I do not really know because this is a difficult field to study. I think

it is because it deals with the Cory's-Scopoli's Shearwater issue, the Manx Shearwater complex, Leach's-Ainley's – Townsend's Storm-Petrel splits and so on. He uses Light-mantled Sooty Albatross instead of the current AOU term, Light-mantled Albatross, and says that this latter is "an insipid name coined by emotionally castrated landlubbers."

Taking photos of birds is difficult on land. Add the problems of a moving boat, the swell and the waves and the process is frustrating. Having tried this for many hours this year I am really impressed with the quality of the photos by Howell and his colleagues. There is an advantage to taking any photograph with a digital camera. Even a poor quality one can reveal details that are hard to pick out in real life. Digital also means you need not feel bad about those wasted shots of half a bird disappearing behind a wave.

Do not expect to resolve all your identification issues. I saw a number of Soft-plumaged Petrels [*Pterodroma mollis*] south of the equator. I am confident that they are correctly identified. I have photographs and I was in the known territory for this species. My problem is I saw three birds that had the same plumage around 25°N – just south of the Canaries, off the coast of Western Sahara. This new book introduces two more possibilities. Fea's Petrel [*Pterodroma feae*] and Zion's Petrel [*Pterodroma madeira*] both breed in the eastern Atlantic. Now I need to review my notes [and memory!] and hope they are good enough. This is a good example of the difficulties of studying birds at sea.

So now I have to pour through my collection of photos from this last trip to re-identify as many individuals as possible. I want to make sure I was correct and that I did not miss any different species. This excellent and detailed book will help me do that. For a novice this book may be intimidating, but for the enthusiast it is an essential purchase. There has not been such an important contribution to understanding seabirds since Peter Harrison's classic "Seabirds of the World. 1983. Houghton Mifflin."

ROY JOHN

2193 Emard Crescent, Ottawa, Ontario K1J 6K5