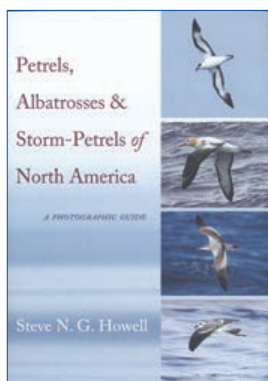


Reviews



Petrels, Albatrosses and Storm-Petrels of North America: a photographic guide

By Steve N. G. Howell

Princeton University Press, 2012

Hbk, 520pp; 975 colour photos and illustrations, 66 distribution maps

ISBN 978-0-6911421-1-1 Subbuteo code M21247

£30.95 **BB Bookshop price £27.50**

Tubenoses, the Procelariiformes, are fabulous birds, which some people consider to be the only 'proper seabirds'. Here, for the first time, is a modern photographic guide covering all taxa recorded in North America (from Panama northwards). This amounts to about half the world's total of 140 or so tubenose species.

If you can resist the temptation to dive straight into the species accounts, the introduction is well worth a careful read. It is informative, thought-provoking and sometimes amusing. The overview of ocean habitats, poorly understood by most of us but key to understanding tubenose distribution and occurrence patterns, is fascinating. Sections on phylogeny and biogeography are of great interest and topicality. Various tubenose forms, previously treated as subspecies or in some cases not yet formally recognised at any taxonomic level, are here elevated to species status based on new studies of genetics and vocalisations. Howell does not follow AOU taxonomy (which he describes as 'particularly anachronistic') but uses his own judgement to pick a more progressive course through various taxonomic papers. The end result is probably a more realistic treatment, though the uncertainty of some decisions and identifications is acknowledged. It seems as though cryptic tubenose species are being discovered all the time and these, such as those within the Band-rumped (Madeiran) Storm-Petrel *Oceanodroma castro* complex, are treated as fully as currently possible. The field identification section runs to 23 pages and covers ageing, sexing, geographic variation, flight, and of course appearance and topography. A well-chosen selection of images illustrates points such as the effects of lighting and the angle of view on the appearance of the bird. Given the author's expertise on moult, it is not surprising that this section is excellent. There are useful tips on how to enjoy (or possibly endure) a pelagic and a final section on conserva-

tion, threats and the value of tubenoses as barometers of the health of our oceans.

The meat of the book, some 450 pages, comprises the family and species accounts, which are grouped into sections such as large shearwaters (*Ardenna* and *Calonectris*), small shearwaters (*Puffinus*), and Atlantic and Pacific gadfly petrels. Each group has an introductory section giving common features of the group, key things to concentrate on for identification to species and comparative photographs of them side by side on the same pages. Some particularly tricky subgroups, such as the Audubon's Shearwater *Puffinus lherminieri* complex (here including Audubon's *P. lherminieri*, Boyd's *P. boydii* and Barolo *P. baroli* shearwaters), are given additional mini overviews.

The species accounts also cover taxonomy and nomenclature, which is interesting but inevitably becomes repetitive for species within a genus (*Pterodroma* means 'winged runner' – with 18 taxa covered in this genus, I should now remember this!). Status and distribution is covered at some length including breeding areas and migration routes, with the greatest detail concerning the status in North America. This detail is summarised in clear maps that show migration routes and seasonal distribution in North America, covering significant parts of the northern Atlantic and Pacific oceans for relevant species. Field identification is summarised in a short paragraph at the start of each account with a much more detailed treatment including habits, behaviour, ocean-by-ocean comparisons with similar species, and moult. There is a mass of well-referenced information here, and it repays close study. The numerous photographs are a key part of the book, of course, and many readers will go straight to them. The number of images per species is usually around 10–15 but with as many as 27 for the polytypic and polymorphic Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*. A handful of taxa have fewer: five for Zino's Petrel

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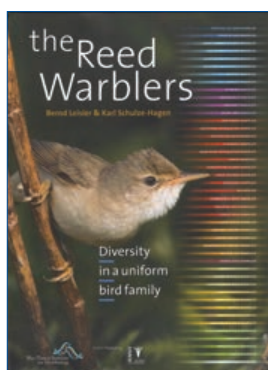


Pterodroma madeira (but 13 for Fea's *P. (fea) fea/desertae*); five for the distinctive but extremely rare (in the region) Hornby's Storm-petrel *O. hornbyi*; and none for just one species. The last is the Critically Endangered Mexican endemic Townsend's Shearwater *Puffinus auricularis*, which instead has a lovely plate by Ian Lewington comparing it with Newell's *P. newelli*, Manx *P. puffinus* and Black-vented *P. opisthomelas* shearwaters. The great majority of photos are good to excellent. Usually fairly closely cropped, they show birds in a variety of positions and from various angles. Nearly all species are also shown on the water, as they will often be encountered on a calm pelagic. Smaller images of the birds in the context of a seascape or alongside likely congeners are included for most species. In total they convey as good a sense of what the bird must look like at sea as is possible from still images. The fact that such a high proportion of the photos were taken by the author is a testament not only to his photographic skills but also to his massive at-sea experience accrued over many years. Captions are beautifully concise, the uncharacteristic error on that for fig. 120, Hawaiian Petrel *Pterodroma sandwichensis*, where 'thick' should presumably be 'thin' is one of very few mistakes I have been able to track down.

Having seen only just under half the birds covered, I am unable to comment on the detailed accounts of many of them, but for those I do know they are accurate in technical detail with eloquent and evocative descriptions of flight actions. In a British context almost all species that might be encountered are covered, with the notable exceptions of Balearic *Puffinus mauretanicus* and Yelkouan *P. yelkouan* shearwaters. The accounts of, for example, Scopoli's *Calonectris (diomedea) diomedea* and Cory's *C. (diomedea) borealis* Shearwaters (with a total of 24 images); Fea's/Desertas and Zino's Petrels; and Barolo Shearwater should prove most useful. Cape Verde Shearwater *C. edwardsii*, which has occurred as a vagrant off North Carolina, is also treated in full and should perhaps be on our radar.

The author's knowledge and love of his subject are reflected in a superb book, which will hopefully inspire more people to get out on the oceans, learn about these magnificent birds and contribute to their conservation. For around £30 it is very reasonably priced – anyone with an interest in seabirds will want to buy it and then start planning their next pelagic!

John Martin



The Reed Warblers: diversity in a uniform bird family

By Bernd Leisler and Karl Schulze-Hagen, illustrations by David Quinn

KNNV Publishing, 2012

Hbk, 327pp; many colour plates and illustrations

ISBN 978-90-50113-91-5 Subbuteo code M21194

£59.99 **BB Bookshop price £53.99**

The Acrocephalidae, including the 'true' reed warblers *Acrocephalus* and the related genera, *Iduna* and *Hippolais* among others, are the archetypal small brown jobs. Given the lack of obvious plumage features of many of them, even quite distantly related species can present significant identification conundrums, and it is difficult to explain to non-birders why birders get so excited about them. Maybe non-birders should read this book.

In spite of what we might politely call the morphological subtlety of the birds themselves, this is not a field guide: it is a visually stunning survey of their lives. The authors are scientists and the level of detail is impressive – graphs, figures and maps in abundance – but this is a long way from being a

dry science text. Starting broadly from the fact that reed warblers and their close relatives tend to look very similar to each other, a series of 15 chapters starts to explain the fascinating ways in which they are different, leading the reader through their systematics, niches and habitats, migration, ecology, breeding biology and behaviour. There are particularly interesting sections covering aspects of habitat preference, showing how different species are adapted to life in different vegetation structures and, for example, explaining such issues as the specific requirements of Aquatic Warblers *A. paludicola*. The reed warblers don't exist in a vacuum, of course: they form part of a guild of insectivorous reedbed passerines (think of Eurasian Reed Warblers *A. scirpaceus* sharing their

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habitat with Bearded Tits *Panurus biarmicus*) and there are no acrocephalid warblers in the Nearctic, so there are chapters comparing their competitors and ecological equivalents in scrub and reed habitats worldwide. The *Acrocephalus* warblers in particular have a spectacular history of colonisation of island habitats – it is this aspect that may be less familiar to *British Birds* readers, and the relevant chapter is well worth a close read.

The knowledge and enthusiasm of the authors comes through clearly, and this represents accessible writing at its very best – clear explanation of

sometimes quite complex subjects, with minimal jargon and statistics. The danger is that this book will not get the exposure and profile that it deserves – it seems to have evaded the attention of the online bibliophiles – which would be a criminal shame. Both content and presentation are of the highest quality; it deserves the widest possible readership and must be a contender for *Bird Book of the Year*.

Martin Collinson



Silent Spring Revisited

By Conor Jameson

Bloomsbury, 2012

Hbk, 288pp

ISBN 978-1-4081-5760-2 Subbuteo code M21126

£19.99 **BB Bookshop price £15.00**

This is a difficult book to review because it falls into several categories. Part history, part review of the demise of so many of our bird populations, part tirade against the evils of industrial-scale agrochemicals, part autobiography, part flag-waving for the RSPB. It is laid out as a historical document, working through each of the years from the publication of Rachel Carson's original (*Silent Spring*, Houghton Mifflin, 1962) to the present day. The author describes the events of each year as they relate to the struggles to get concerted action to protect the natural environment from vested interests in the forestry, development and agrochemical industries and, latterly, those who deny the effects (or even the existence of) climate change. The lack of effective action by national and international governments adds to the depressing mix, yet it makes for an interesting tale – reminding me of many events that I had half-forgotten! A constant theme is how many and dra-

matic are the changes in bird populations (usually, but not always, for the worse), with numerous quotations from RSPB luminaries. Interleaved are anecdotes from the author's personal life, which give speckles of charm in what at times tends towards a chronicle of doom. The serious reader will find little biological detail: for that you must go to books like *Silent Summer* (Cambridge University Press, 2010; edited by Norman MacLean and surprisingly not in the list of suggested further reading) or more technical reports from researchers in the BTO, the universities, and national and regional conservation agencies. Science this is not, but then I guess that Conor Jameson did not set out to write such a book. It is, however, an easy read, and a clear and concise historical overview of the failures and successes of the conservation movement since the 1960s; and it will rightly find a place on many a conservationist's bookshelf.

David Parkin

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Eagle Days

By Stuart Rae

Langford Press, 2012

Pbk, 195pp; many colour photographs

ISBN 978-1-904078-44-9 Subbuteo code M21339

£18.99 **BB Bookshop price £17.00**

This is the first book in a new series with a theme of 'Birds and People'. The book is taken up mainly by a series of evocative descriptions of the author's exploits in the field over many years of searching for and monitoring Golden Eagles *Aquila chrysaetos* in Scotland. There is a focus on the breeding season and the annual quest to pin down the locations of breeding pairs and monitor the outcome at nests that are found. The extent of the effort involved in collecting this information comes across strongly. Some sites require several hours of hard walking over difficult terrain just to reach the breeding area and because the birds roam over such huge distances there is no guarantee that one will be seen during a day's fieldwork. Add in the vagaries of the weather, swarms of biting insects and the need to scramble over rocky slopes or wade through treacherous bogs in order to reach potential nest-sites and it quickly becomes apparent that eagle monitoring will not be for everyone. It clearly does appeal to Stuart and his enthusiasm for this work and for the bird itself shines through on every page, even under the most testing of circumstances. Indeed, Stuart's involvement in eagle monitoring almost came to an abrupt end when he attempted to cross a particularly challenging piece of terrain.

The book is largely descriptive with a broad coverage that encompasses the landscape visited and the diverse range of wildlife that it supports. But there is no shortage of information about the eagles themselves and there are detailed accounts of many fascinating aspects of eagle behaviour based on first-hand observations. Each of these are, to some extent, chance encounters and moments of good fortune but, of course, are only possible because of the long hours spent in the field, hunting for eagles. New technology such as the use of satellite transmitters will certainly help to improve our understanding of eagle movements and habitat use in future but, for certain aspects of eagle behaviour, there will be no substitute for direct observations. The need for fieldwork of the type described in this book will, thankfully, remain for many years to come.

The book is superbly illustrated with the author's own photographs, some of the eagles themselves, but many showing the wide range of other animals and plants that may be encountered when off the beaten track in the Highlands. Reading through the book was certainly a very pleasant way to while away a few hours indoors, at the same time firing an enthusiasm to spend more time outside watching wildlife at first hand.

Ian Carter

Finding Birds in Mallorca

By Dave Gosney

www.easybirder.co.uk, 2012

DVD (72 mins) and 37-page booklet

ISBN 978-1-907316-39-5/978-1-907316-38-8

Subbuteo code V60068/M10378

BB Bookshop price £20.00

Twenty years ago, when the previous edition of the booklet was published, Mallorca was one of the most popular foreign destinations for UK birders. As global travel has become easier, fewer birders are now choosing Mallorca, yet this is still a great place to watch migration, with the bonus of a number of key specialities thrown in for good measure. On top of that, Mallorca is a beautiful

island (away from the tourist fleshpots) and a relatively cheap and easy destination to get to. This is the most up-to-date guide to all the key sites, including the magnificent s'Albufera, and you can help to keep it up to date via the free app 'Finding Birds: the latest gen', available for any computer and most smartphones via the apps page of the easybirder website (see above). *RR*

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