

# Reviews

## Identification Guide to Birds in the Hand

By Laurent Demongin

Privately published, 2016

Pbk, 392pp; many black-and-white photographs, line-drawings

ISBN 978-2-9555019-0-0

£42.99

Ringers have always relied on guides that provide specific biometric and ageing criteria to ensure that they correctly identify, age and sex any bird they capture. In this new guide, Laurent Demongin has brought together a wealth of information on the 301 species most frequently caught in western Europe (154 non-passerines, 147 passerines). In addition, a further 249 infrequently captured species (including vagrants from Siberia and North America) are included in less detail for comparison with similar but more regularly encountered species. Originally published in French, this English version has been updated and expanded to include detailed treatment of an extra 51 species, along with additional information including schematic figures of moult sequence, BTO and Euring codes and a short list of references, although the full bibliography consulted is available only online.

The layout is simple and straightforward, commencing with seven introductory chapters addressing a range of topics including terminology, measuring methods, moult, sexing and age criteria. Individual species accounts follow, which cover the identification and comparison with similar species where relevant, then work through measurements, geographical variation, moult, sex and age. Most species accounts include one or more black-and-white photographs, line-drawings or diagrams: some are relevant to a species' identification or extent of moult, others illustrate particular feathers or feather tracts used to determine age. For almost every species a simple line chart illustrates the chronological moult progression over a three-year period, making this data readily accessible and understandable. Distribution maps are also provided for a handful of species including the races of Dunlin *Calidris alpina* and Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*, and European large white-headed gulls.

Inevitably, this guide will draw critical comparison with Lars Svensson's *Identification Guide to European Passerines*, last updated in 1992. For over 40 years, this has been the 'gold standard' and there can be few European ringers who haven't used a

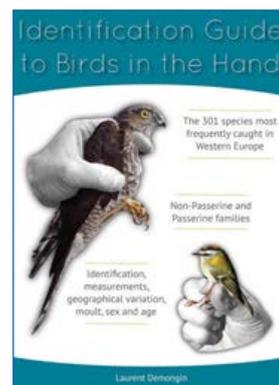
'Svensson' at some point. For many it is a familiar and friendly reference and the first place to

turn to when sexing or ageing an unfamiliar passerine. This new guide takes users beyond where Svensson left off and into the next era, and includes much more that has come to light in the 25 years since the last Svensson update.

So how do the two guides compare? The provision of in-hand biometrics data to aid passerine identification is similar in both guides. The Demongin guide includes an additional 154 non-passerines that Svensson doesn't address, although some of these are included in BTO guides to European non-passerines and waders. Moulting charts, absent from Svensson, neatly illustrate moult timing and progression throughout the year. Precise information on racial variation and separation from similar, unfamiliar species is explored in greater detail by Demongin and will prove invaluable, particularly at coastal ringing sites where unfamiliar species are more likely to be encountered.

Will the Demongin guide become the new Svensson and displace it as the ringers' guide of choice? On the face of it, it certainly appears to tick all the boxes and provide much of the quality information one could possibly need to process a bird in the hand. But in trying to make this guide portable and sufficiently small to fit into a ringer's kit box, the layout has suffered. Line spacing is minimal, font size has been reduced to the almost indecipherable, the text is particularly faint and I needed a magnifying glass to read it. Compared with the larger font and clarity of Svensson, these apparent minor failings may be a serious handicap for that generation of ringers whose eyesight is not what it used to be. In A4 format it would be far more user-friendly, and perhaps this is something that might be addressed in future?

This guide will become an essential reference in ringing labs and observatories. Non-ringers will



also find it a great resource, to improve their understanding of techniques used to identify, age and sex birds in the hand, some which rarely appear in field guides. And even those familiar with

moult will find the moult progression charts illuminating. Just keep your magnifying glass handy.

*Peter Kennerley*

### Reclaiming South Georgia: the defeat of furry invaders on a sub-Antarctic island

By Tony Martin and Team Rat

South Georgia Heritage Trust, 2016

Hbk, 144pp; numerous colour photographs

ISBN 978-0-9564546-3-8

£25.00 from [www.sghtonline.gs/Reclaiming-South-Georgia](http://www.sghtonline.gs/Reclaiming-South-Georgia)



I've been to South Georgia once, as a tourist for a few days in March 2008 on board the old *Professor Molchanov*. After a productive crossing from Antarctica across the Scotia Sea, we slowly cruised into the Bay of Isles towards Salisbury Plain on a calm, sky-blue morning and the scenery and abundance of wildlife ahead of us was simply jaw-dropping. Once ashore, the birders quickly found a couple of South Georgia Pipits *Anthus antarcticus* before taking hundreds of photos of penguins and fur seals, but the only other pipits I saw were that afternoon on nearby rat-free Prion Island. At the time I was aware that Brown Rats *Rattus norvegicus*, an unintended legacy of the sealing and whaling eras, were a problem on mainland South Georgia. However, it took a single paragraph of masterly natural history writing early on in this book to really drive home to me the impact they have had on populations of burrowing and crevice-nesting petrels; the nocturnally silent slopes of the high ground around Grytviken (for example) contrast starkly with the cacophony and sheer mass of petrels and prions found in similar habitat on rat-free islands such as Cooper and Annenkov.

The decision in 2007 by the South Georgia Heritage Trust (SGHT) to eradicate rodents from the island was bold (apologies to SGHT, but it is difficult to find an adjective powerful enough), and Tony Martin was appointed Project Director. After introductory chapters explaining why this project was considered necessary and had to be undertaken soon, how it was to be achieved, and a descriptive tour around the island and its off-liers, the bulk of the book is simply a well-written account of the planning and logistics of the three phases of fieldwork (2011, 2013, 2015), which involved carefully scattering 302 tonnes of rodent-

icide bait by helicopters across 1,070 km<sup>2</sup> of ice-free terrain on one of the remotest and most inhospitable islands in the world. Despite having avidly followed the story via SGHT e-newsletters, I still found it page-turning stuff and read it in a single sitting; the book is also beautifully produced and illustrated by many remarkable photos. As a tale of derring-do it takes some beating, and that alone is a reason to buy this book. More importantly, it has been published as a fundraiser for the final stage of the project, a monitoring expedition in 2017/18 to validate that South Georgia is finally rodent-free – fingers are crossed for this!

The early signs, from increased numbers of pipits and pintails (the endemic South Georgia race of Yellow-billed Pintail *Anas georgica*), are positive but if procellariiforms are to benefit from the 'release' of a vast area of predator-free nesting habitat, their life-histories mean it may take several decades before population-level increases occur or are detectable. Tony Martin describes his involvement in the project as 'the experience of a lifetime', and earlier this year he was named Conservationist of the Year by the Zoological Society of London. It would be deeply satisfying to think that in 40 years time birders approaching South Georgia by sea will encounter far greater numbers of prions, diving petrels and storm-petrels than we saw in 2008. If so, it would be appropriate that, following the custom currently performed at Ernest Shackleton's grave at Grytviken, they raise their glasses to toast the original Directors of SGHT and their financial backers for their vision, and all the members of Team Rat for their ingenuity and endurance.

*Martin Heubeck*



## Seabirds of the World: secret realm of the oceans' wanderers

By David Tipling

Reed New Holland, 2016

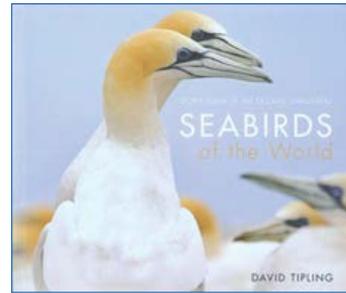
Hbk, 192pp; 151 colour photographs

ISBN 978-1-92151-767-9

£16.99, *BB Bookshop* price £15.70

The title of this book may be somewhat misleading. It is no heavyweight compendium, but rather a selection of 151 photographs taken by the author, each accompanied by a few sentences of text, and loosely ordered into five sections: at sea, the mating game, family life, seabird cities and survival. Geographically, there is a distinct bias towards the higher latitudes of both hemispheres and a slightly disappointing dearth of tropical species (particularly boobies, terns and noddies), but this may simply reflect time in the field and the extent of the author's catalogue, although he has clearly visited the Galapagos.

David Tipling's work has been used in many books and features regularly in *BB*. I am no photographer but would rank a very few of the selection as workman-like, the majority as towards the upper end of pleasing to excellent, and a few as outstanding. Two, of which I have never seen the like, feature Southern Giant Petrels *Macronectes giganteus*. The first is of two immatures, raised out of the water and squabbling belly to belly in a manner reminiscent of a pair of bull Southern Elephant Seals *Mirounga leonine* battling over territory on a South Georgia beach. The second, to



which I keep returning because it is so extraordinary,

is of four (I think) adults fighting over a seal carcass but taken with a slow shutter speed and therefore blurred 'to create a more painterly effect'. This is a gross understatement. The sheer aggression conveyed is almost non-avian, and if I were unfortunate enough to manage a seafront fish and chip shop on the south coast of England, I'd hang it on the wall with the caption 'Seagulls? - count yourself lucky.'

The book is well produced, apart from a few photos that are split between the very deep between-page creases, most notably the one of a Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans* cresting a breaker whose right wing is unforgivably fractured. An Appendix gives technical details for each photo and if there was an intended target audience it would probably be budding photographers, but this book would make a nice present for anyone who really appreciates seabirds.

*Martin Heubeck*

## The Extraordinary Beauty of Birds: design, patterns and details

By Deborah Samuel

Prestel Publishing, 2016

Hbk, 288pp; 225 colour images

ISBN 978-3-7913-8203-6

£29.99

As an artist I always enjoy looking at publications from the dark side of the artistic spectrum – photography. Unfortunately in the case of this book, it is darkness that is a bit of an issue for me. There are 225 colour images, with each image presented on a 24 cm × 24 cm page. Close-up studio shots of feathers, dead birds, eggs and nests are set against a black background – therein lies the issue for me. When I open a page that presents the feather patterns of a Superb Lyrebird *Menura novaehollandiae*, Great Argus *Argusianus argus* or tail of a King Bird-of-paradise *Cicinnurus regius*, I expect the colours and patterns to leap off the page

and knock my no. 6 brush clean across the room. Sadly this just doesn't happen to me with this book. I am certain that the original photos are stunning and I suspect that the rich detail and depth of colour of the originals has been lost in the printing of the book. This is clearly shown in the photo of an American Crow *Corvus brachyrhynchos*, where it is virtually impossible to see anything other than a black page. I can't help but think that the opportunity to create an extraordinary book has been missed.

*Dan Powell*



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