

ALBATROSSES AND PETRELS ACROSS THE WORLD

BROOKE, M. DE L. 2004. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 499 pp. with 16 colour plates and numerous line drawings by John Cox. Distribution map for the each of the 125 species. Hard cover. ISBN 0-19-850125-0. UK £95; US \$164.

Albatross and Petrels Across the World is the 11th volume of the Oxford University Press series *Bird Families of the World* that started 10 years ago with *The Hornbills* and *The Penguins*. *Bird Families of the World* is a multivolume series of handbooks, with each volume providing a comprehensive synthesis of our knowledge of one bird group. With *Albatrosses and Petrels*, we are dealing with a complete order (the Procellariiformes) that includes 125 species in four families: the albatrosses, petrels, storm-petrels and diving petrels. The previous book in the series was dedicated to the 21 species of Bowerbirds; it consists of 532 pages. With a total of 125 procellariiform species, we might, by comparison, expect a much bigger volume than the 500 pages found here. We therefore cannot have a level of detail in this volume similar to that of the other volumes in the series that dealt with much less diverse bird groups.

As with the other volumes in the series, the book is divided into two distinct parts. The first part addresses general topics, including an introduction to the petrels, chapters on origin and evolution, coloniality, three chapters on breeding biology, two on demography, and two on foraging and conservation. This account of what is known about the Procellariiformes is well-balanced, and it represents an extremely clear and easy-to-read introduction to the group, with many original ideas from the author. Covering every aspect in great detail, or being complete on each of the topics that Brooke decided to cover, is, of course, not possible in 160 pages.

The second part of the book contains the species accounts, which are very comprehensive and updated—so well updated, in fact, that an inserted account of the recently re-discovered New Zealand Petrel *Oceanites maorianus* is even included. Each species account includes information on mass and measurements, field characteristics, voice, habitat, food, breeding behaviour, lifecycle, range and status.

The book is nicely illustrated throughout with line drawings, sketches and photographs. I particularly liked the excellent colour plates. Representing series of very similar species in a single plate, such as the *Pterodroma* species or storm-petrels, is a very difficult job. Here, that job has been excellently done, and the great originality of the plates is to provide many beautiful sketches of birds in colonies.

Mike Brooke is a world expert on petrels, who started to work on Manx Shearwaters *Puffinus puffinus* 30 years ago, and who has since visited many remote places to study petrels. As he honestly admits in the introduction, the first part of the book was extensively inspired by the seminal work of John Warham, who published in 1990 and 1996 two volumes on petrels that provided at that time a very complete review of literature available on petrels (Warham 1990, 1996). Since then, many advances have been made and many studies published on foraging and on molecular systematic, conservation and population dynamics. The Warham books were incredible sources of information (and on some topics are still the only easy source of information), but they were disappointing in some respects for their lack of synthesis. The opportunity to provide a synthetic work in a few hundred pages was thus available for

Brooke. In this respect the synthetic first part of Brooke's book is uneven, probably as a result of the author's interests. For example, I found the chapters on breeding biology and foraging ecology very exciting, giving a very synthetic view of the topics, with the most up-to date information incorporated in addition to the author's own views. Conversely, other chapters—such as those on evolution and population dynamics—are simply a compilation of information without a real attempt at an overview.

I found the second part of the book, the species accounts (258 pages for 125 species, averaging two pages per species) very valuable in the sense that it is an up-to-date complete account of all procellariiform species. An estimate of population size is included for all species (which will probably be criticised), but it has the advantage of giving at least a first idea.

The maps are quite informative. The difficult task of species identification is not covered, but identification is not really the objective of such a book. The species accounts take into account the new taxonomy that has emerged over the past 10 years, without falling into the regrettable tendency of petrel taxonomists to split populations indefinitely into new species based on genetic analyses.

At the present time, an amateur or scientist wishing to read a synthetic account on the Procellariiformes may be puzzled by the increasing number of books available. These include on the one hand *The Handbook of the Birds of the World* (Del Hoyo *et al.* 1992) and seabird field guides, and on the other hand, the more complete syntheses on petrels and albatrosses by Warham (1990, 1996) and Tickell (2000—on albatrosses only, but also very complete). Mike Brooke's book stands in the middle and is definitely a perfect compromise in this respect for readers interested in petrels. I therefore warmly recommend this book to anyone interested in an introduction to the world of petrels and albatrosses, or to those looking for an up-to-date review of their biology or species information.

The only major criticism about the book I would make is its price; US\$164 is ridiculously high, and many readers who are non-specialists or amateurs cannot afford to pay such a price, although the book is to a large extent formatted for that readership.

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