

News and notices

BOOK REVIEWS

TICKELL, W.L.N. 2000. *Albatrosses*. Pica Press, East Sussex. ISBN 1-873403-94-1, hardback, 448pp. Price £ 40,=.

This is a noteworthy book, being the first modern review of the family and also a virtual encyclopaedia of published information, formal and informal, learned and anecdotal, on albatrosses.

The main part of the book is divided into two sections. The first is on the species or species groups of albatrosses; this is itself divided into three: a) southern albatrosses (mollymawks, sooty and great albatrosses), with introductory chapters on the Southern Ocean and detailed descriptions of their breeding islands; b) tropical albatrosses (only the Galapagos albatross), introduced by a brief section on the equatorial Pacific Ocean; and c) northern albatrosses (Laysan, Black-footed and Steller's), introduced by a short account of the north Pacific Ocean. These chapters are workmanlike compilations, including many figures and tables, with full account taken of historical data as well as summarising the findings of more recent research. The chapters that seem best balanced to me are those on the northern albatrosses - though this may reflect the lack of much recent research, making compilation and synthesis more straightforward. The treatment of the southern albatrosses was disappointing. The mollymawk chapter is typical in that much space is devoted to oceanic distribution (10 pages) and to the location of colonies on breeding islands (10 pages), whereas the whole of breeding biology is summarised in eight pages and food and feeding ecology in just five. Inevitably, this fails to do justice to the extensive recent research, on a variety of species (some from more than one site), revealing interesting features of the relationships between foraging range, feeding area and features of the marine environment.

The second section of the book comprises chapters on moult, flight, behaviour and ecology. The chapter on moult is inevitably brief, principally recapitulating Peter Prince's work on Grey-headed, Black-browed and Wandering Albatrosses at South Georgia. The opportunity is missed to try to reconcile these interpretations, based on inferring past moult from the age of feathers in the wing, with data based on examination of specimens of Laysan and Black-footed Albatrosses in active moult (the work of Langston and collaborators). The treatment of flight is better, though overly relying on extensive extracts from the pioneering studies. In contrast, the behaviour chapter does provide a real new synthesis of information and represents essential

reading for anyone interested in the complex and varied rituals of these species at their breeding sites.

Considering the volume of work on albatross feeding ecology and population dynamics in recent years, the chapter on ecology fails to convey the substantial advances in our understanding of inter-relationships between breeding frequency, breeding performance and survival, in appreciating interspecific differences in demography and, in particular, the range of novel insights into the life of these birds at sea. There is only brief mention of how we have become able to relate what they eat to how they catch it to where they find it and to how they organise the provisioning of their offspring, including quantification of trade-offs between parent and offspring priorities.

These major sections of the book are complemented by interesting accounts of: (a) naming of albatrosses and the naturalists associated with their discovery and study; (b) the main characteristics of the family; and (c) albatrosses in verse. There is also a rather perfunctory account of threats to albatrosses and work to address these.

Despite some shortcomings this is still a fine book and, particularly because of its extensive use of quotations and wide reference to historical accounts, immensely readable. It gives an excellent historical background to the family and a competent review of the literature. Thus it provides the building blocks but does not arrange them to develop new insights or to highlight the research challenges of the future. Nevertheless it will be read widely by ornithologists, especially seabird biologists, and notably by those with a fascination for these charismatic birds and their remote nesting places.

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