

BOOK REVIEWS

ANKER-NILSSEN T., V. BAKKEN, H. STRØM, A.N. GOLOVKIN, V.V. BIANKI & I.P. TATRINKOVA (eds) 2000. *The status of marine birds breeding in the Barents Sea region*. Rapport nr. 113, Norsk Polarinstitutt, Tromsø. ISBN 82-7666-176-9, hardback, 213pp, many tables, some diagrams, many full colour maps, black & white drawings. Price Euro 60,= incl. postage and handling.

Although produced in a report series, this really is an A4 size book and should be treated as such. It is an excellent summary of current knowledge of seabirds in the Barents Sea region, jointly produced by Norwegian and Russian scientists. The book consists of four main parts: a (very) brief description of the Barents Sea region ecosystem (Chapter 2), species descriptions (Chapter 3, 130 pages), a summary of threats to marine birds in the region (Chapter 4), and recommendations (Chapter 5). The book aims to present up-to-date information on all the marine birds breeding in the Barents Sea (northern Norway, Bear Island, Svalbard, Franz Josef Land, Novaya Zemlya, the Murman coast and the Nenetski district), including breeding distribution, population sizes and trends, migration patterns (including ringing recoveries) and feeding ecology. Second and third aims of this book are the identification of major gaps in present knowledge and to identify threats to the populations and to propose research activities that should be given special priority.

The chapter on the Barents Sea ecosystem is a little disappointing. Apart from a map of the area, maps of ocean currents, distribution areas of three species of fish, water surface temperatures and July ice cover, there is a brief text dealing with peculiarities of the Norwegian Sea (the north end of which is covered by this book), the Barents Sea and the White Sea. The capelin stock collapses of the 1980s and 1990s in the Barents Sea are very briefly mentioned, although certainly the first crash caused mass mortality and major declines in some seabird populations. One would then expect to have this topic addressed in more depth in Chapter 4 (threats to populations), but there we find mere repetition of the text in Chapter 2, plus some inconclusive remarks about the difficulty 'separating the human and natural effects in quantitative terms' - a political statement rather than an in depth review of present knowledge and consensus!

The main body of the book, and certainly the reason why any serious European seabirder should buy a copy, is Chapter 3: Species descriptions. Attractive accounts of divers, tube-noses, Northern Gannet, Great Cormorant and Shag, *Anser* and *Branta* geese, marine ducks, several coastal waders, skuas, gulls, terns and auks are provided. The structure is clear, the lay-out is wonderful, the (large!) indian ink drawings of the species by Eugeny Koblik are

very attractive and the full colour maps are both easy to read (but rather small) and authoritative. The texts include a general description, an account of breeding distribution and habitat preferences in the Barents Sea region, movements, population status and historical trends, feeding ecology, threats, special studies and recommendations. Nearly all species are written by two co-authors, usually a Russian/Norwegian combination. Even rare breeding species, such as the Great Northern Diver, are dealt with in two pages of information, while commoner birds take three, four or occasionally even five pages. It is therefore remarkable to see that the Red-throated Diver is not included. There is no text and the bird does not appear in any of the tables summarising threats and research recommendations. Yet, any visitor of the Barents Sea will know that it is far more likely to flush a breeding Red-throated Diver from its nest than it is to even see a Great Northern Diver! After questioning the authors about this, it appeared that Red-throated Divers were not considered 'marine birds' (species that depend on the marine environment within the Barents Sea region)! Apparently for the same reason the Long-tailed Skua was omitted. Both birds feed at sea in the region, although when breeding perhaps some (or even most) of the food is obtained at or around tundra lakes; I think the book would have greatly benefited by including these species.

The distribution maps use green symbols for colonies that have not been censused, red (scaled) symbols for colonies for which the number of breeding pairs could be estimated, green contours for (potential) breeding areas without precise knowledge of total numbers and yellow contours for 'possible' breeding areas. It is interesting to see that all of northern Norway and most of the Murmansk area are proclaimed 'possible breeding areas' for European Storm Petrel (two Lofoten colonies known) and Leach's Storm-petrel (one Lofoten colony known). It is far more important, however, to see how many 'gaps' in our knowledge exist on Svalbard, often advertised as one of the best protected nature reserves in the world, where colony symbols are typically green in most (commoner) species! Even if population status is given, the data are often quite old. For example, it is quite well known that Grey Phalaropes have declined locally, but the latest population estimate (150-300 pairs) was published in 1981! As a frequent traveller and researcher in the Svalbard archipelago, I often had the opportunity to collect data that now appear to would have been rather valuable. Many more keen ornithologists travel these waters and visit colonies, so that a simple request could have resulted in a large amount of data that does not seem to be available right now. The population estimate for Northern Fulmar for the entire study area (and also for Svalbard alone) is still 100 000 to 1 000 000 pairs. I don't believe the latter figure (for Svalbard, or they must be mostly on Bear Island), and would be keen to know how close the total population actually is to the first figure. Northern Gannets are faring very well

(2% increase *per annum*), with 2200 pairs in northern Norway in 1995 and a single pair at the Murmansk coast. Cormorants (8800 pairs) and Shags (9150 pairs) are similarly restricted to the southern coasts of the Barents Sea region. Great Skuas are rapidly colonising the area, with 200-350 pairs in Svalbard (1995), one pair at Novaya Zemlya (1992), two pairs in the Nenetski district, four pairs along the Murmansk coast and 20-30 pairs in northern Norway. The size of the Ivory Gull population is still uncertain, with >200 pairs in Svalbard and 'several thousand' in Franz Josef Land. The most abundant breeding seabird of the region is the Black-legged Kittiwake (*c.* 900 000 pairs, half of which breed in northern Norway, 270 000 in Svalbard), Brünnich's Guillemot (1 750 000 pairs, with 850 000 on Novaya Zemlya and 850 000 in Svalbard), Little Auk (> 1 300 000 pairs, with 1 million in Svalbard alone), and Atlantic Puffin (2 000 000 pairs, nearly all in northern Norway). For Puffins and Brünnich's Guillemots, populations are in decline or presumably stable. Little is known of the Little Auk, largely because these birds are so difficult to census, let alone monitor. Kittiwakes populations seem to be slowly increasing (Norway and Russia) or stable (Svalbard).

The review of threats to marine birds addresses fisheries, harvesting, bycatch, oil pollution, other pollutants, disturbance, area encroachments, conflicting species and other factors.. For each area, a colourful summary table provides a concise overview of current and potential threats to each species. Similarly, in the Recommendations section, the status and priorities for mapping breeding populations are illustrated and discussed for all subregions within each area. Ten further tables summarise research and mapping priorities for each of the threats identified earlier.

In short, this is a must-have for everybody interested in the seabirds of the (northern) North Atlantic. It is a fine introduction to the richness of seabird diversity in the Barents Sea and an excellent summary of present knowledge, not only in terms of status and trends, but also in terms of habitat preferences and prey choice. Let us hope that this book will stimulate future research and more thorough population assessments, for example by encouraging the ever increasing number of scientists and ornithologists visiting the Barents Sea area to report or publish their observations.

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