BOOK REVIEW

Petrels, Albatrosses and Storm-Petrels of North America: A Photographic Guide, by Steve N. G. Howell. 2012. Princeton University Press. xxii + 483 pp., 960 color photographs, 52 maps, 1 painted plate, 8 tables, numerous drawings and charts. Clothbound, $45.00. ISBN 978-0-691-14211-1.

It's hard for seabirders today to imagine how little truly helpful popular literature existed about the field identification of the tubenoses (highly marine birds of the order Procellariiformes) just a couple of decades ago. Yes, Peter Harrison's *tour de force*, *Seabirds, An Identification Guide* (1983, Houghton Mifflin, Boston), brought the world's species into our consciousness, even if the painted illustrations sometimes strayed a bit from reality and many aspects of taxonomic and individual variation were not well understood at that time. Onley and Scofield's *Albatrosses, Petrels and Shearwaters* (2007, Princeton University Press) incorporated considerable information coming to light in the two decades after Harrison's guide, but it missed the mark on many details and used only paintings, albeit improved over Harrison's. Some excellent journal articles have tackled particular identification issues, but Steve Howell's new tubenose book represents a giant leap forward and one of the best single sources on seabird identification yet published.

Petrels, Albatrosses and Storm-Petrels of North America owes its considerable success primarily to three things: (1) the author's relentless dedication to observing and scrutinizing the world's procellariiform birds in the field, (2) the phenomenal advances in digital photography (skillfully applied by Howell, who took the great majority of the photos in the book) that now make a well-executed photographic guide far better than a guide using only painted plates, and (3) thoughtful and careful organization of the dense textual and visual material.

Howell's approach, as in his *Gulls of the Americas* co-authored with Jon Dunn (2007, Houghton Mifflin), is to make liberal use of photographs with detailed interpretive captions. The photographs include not only stunning portraits but also a great many "real life" images (many also stunning) showing how birds really look in the field, often with comparison species in the same image. This is particularly important for tubenoses, a group whose appearance in the field varies wildly depending on lighting and cloud conditions, angle, distance, wind speed, etc.

The author casts a wide net in his species coverage. With full accounts for 70 species-level (or near-species level) taxa, corresponding to about 61 species as currently recognized by the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU), he covers all tubenoses ever recorded in the waters off North America (defined here as within 200 nautical miles of Alaska and Canada south to Panama, including the Caribbean). Another 21 species are covered under "Similar Species" sections or have brief accounts of their own; most of these are illustrated with photographs. The result is that far more species are covered than in the two most popular North American field guides (51 in the National Geographic Society's *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, 28 in *The Sibley Guide to Birds*).

The must-read introductory sections discuss procellariiform biology, including information highly relevant to field identification such as topography, molt strategies, flight manners, and habitat preferences (yes, there are varied "habitats" on what looks to many of us like a uniform ocean surface). The introduction also includes a discussion of the realities of looking for and identifying tubenoses at sea, factoring in lighting, distance and wind effect; this is an art form at which the author excels and, importantly, is able to convey to the reader clearly.

The bulk of the book consists of species accounts, but each family, and within families each grouping (large shearwaters, small shearwaters, Atlantic and Pacific gadfly petrels, "other" petrels, North Pacific albatrosses, "vagrant albatrosses," white-rumped

storm-petrels, dark-rumped storm-petrels, and "distinctive" storm-petrels) receives an overview of characteristics, taxonomic issues, and helpful identification approaches. Each species is illustrated with roughly 10 to 20 photographs (from 5 to as many as 27). A single painted plate (p. 147; by Ian Lewington) of small black-and-white shearwaters is included to facilitate species comparisons and to acknowledge that acceptable photographs of some poorly studied taxa are simply not available (the book's only photo of a Townsend's Shearwater appears in the Conservation section of the Introduction). After the main species accounts are brief text accounts for two recently extinct species (the Jamaican Petrel and Guadalupe Storm-Petrel) and three species of "hypothetical" occurrence. The text uses standard author-year format to liberally cite published literature, and over 400 references are provided.

Howell has never shied away from tackling taxonomic issues in his guides. He rightfully considers the AOU slow to adopt changes, but his railing against that committee sometimes assumes Phillipsian proportions. It is incumbent on a guide such as this to treat all taxa, even if species status and field identification criteria are unclear. "Species-level decisions" are really not that important in such a guide, as long as the issues are explained. Howell generally does a good job of this. He "splits" several species (e.g., within the Band-rumped Storm-Petrel, Leach's Storm-Petrel, Shy Albatross, and Wandering Albatross) not yet tackled by the AOU. Increasing genetic work with tubenoses seems to support a trend of more splits, but many groups have not received comprehensive study. The AOU's conservatism stems in part from a reluctance to make piecemeal or incremental changes to incompletely studied groups and to await formal publication (preferably multiple corroborative publications) of taxonomic studies. In short, Howell's decisions on taxa to treat in this guide are entirely defensible given the purpose of the guide, and, as we have seen with his departures in *A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America* (1995, Oxford University Press), many or most will ultimately be adopted.

In rare cases Howell is less well-served by his vitriol. He takes issue with the AOU's adoption of the English name "Light-mantled Albatross" for *Phoebetria palpebrata*, suggesting this "insipid" name was coined by "emotionally castrated landlubbers" (p. 344). But, as is so often the case in nomenclature, the issue is more complex. Howell uses "Light-mantled Sooty Albatross" for this species and "Sooty Albatross" for its congener, *P. fusca*, continuing the undesirable situation where the name of one species differs from another simply by the addition of an adjective. This brings to mind the British usage of the past when names like "Storm Petrel," "Jay," "Wheatear," and "Crossbill" were used for the chosen few species, while their less deserving congeners required one or more adjectives to distinguish them. Howell is better off applying his considerable talents and, yes, venom, to the identification and biogeographical questions at which he excels.

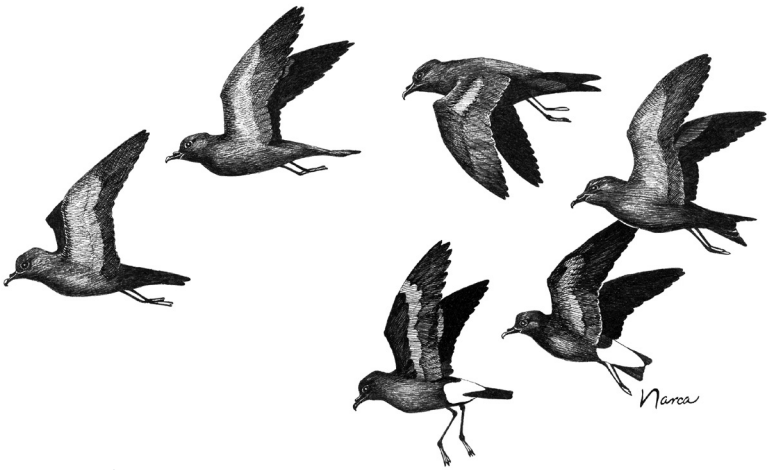
Some of Howell's conclusions are at variance with state and ABA checklist committees, entities for which he has been known to express disdain. He correctly mentions that a September Bulwer's Petrel off southern California was not accepted by the California Bird Records Committee (p. 274), though he, and a majority of the CBRC, believed the documentation was acceptable), but he fails to mention that a supposed July Tristram's Storm-Petrel off southern California he includes (and personally identified in the field) was also not accepted by the committee because of the brevity of the views (p. 431). It was surprising to this CBRC member that the "Shy Albatross" (*sensu lato*) off northern California in 2001, tentatively assigned by the committee to *Thalassarche* [*cauta*] *salvini*, is considered by Howell to be North America's first Chatham Albatross (*T.* [*c.*] *eremita*; p. 325); a photo can be found in *North American Birds* 55(4):507, 2001. Howell also considers a bird photographed off North Carolina in September 1995 to be North America's first Zino's Petrel (*Pterodroma madeira*; p. 188). The analysis of such records comes down to whether the documentation adequately proves the occurrence of the taxon involved, and there will always be

disagreements about such things (especially in a committee in which a small minority of votes not to accept will result in the rejection of a record). Is Howell right? I can't judge, but when he speaks, we should listen.

The many strengths of the book include an expansive list of treated taxa, descriptions of flight styles under varying conditions, a detailed look at plumage variation within species (including effects of wear, fading and molt), excellent analyses of shape and structure characters, groundbreaking identification criteria, and photographs to back up all of these features. The distributional information is detailed, and the text is extremely well written and user-friendly. No important weaknesses come to mind, other than that we are all still learning a great deal about this fascinating order of birds and the coming years and decades will yield many important improvements to any successor to this fine volume.

Owning and devouring this guide is essential for all birders who go on pelagic trips anywhere off North America, who seawatch from coastal points, or who eschew boat trips but want to learn a great deal about one of the most intriguing groups of birds in the world. The broad taxonomic and geographic coverage also makes this book highly valuable for birders venturing anywhere in the oceans of the northern hemisphere and in fact almost anywhere apart from the Antarctic and Indian Ocean.

Kimball L. Garrett



Storm-Petrels

Sketch by Narca Moore-Craig