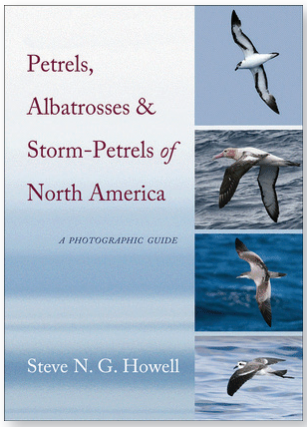
Book Review



Petrels, Albatrosses & Storm-Petrels *of* North America: A Photographic Guide.

Steve N.G. Howell. 2012. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, USA. Octavo, hardcover, coloured photographs and maps, 520 pp. ISBN 9780691142111. RRP US$45.

This review is not written from the perspective of a seabird specialist, nor a pelagic expert, but rather, from that of an enthusiastic pelagic participant; someone who knows the majority of the seabirds they see, but still needs assistance on the more cryptic ones. For this reviewer, good guides are an essential aid and *Petrels, Albatrosses and Storm-Petrels of North America* by Steve N. G. Howell certainly fulfils this requirement.

The first impression of the book is that it is big. This is certainly not a guide that you would consider taking into the field – it is almost A4 in size and approximately 500 pages. However, it is exceptionally informative, and should be viewed as a reference book rather than a guide. In the Preface, Howell provides a timeline of previously published seabird field guides and states that "there is still no good modern identification guide to the world's tubenoses" (page xiii). This statement is probably harsh, considering the excellent works of Shirihai's *A Complete Guide to Antarctic Wildlife* (for Southern Ocean species) (2002) and Onley and Scofield's *Albatrosses, Petrels and Shearwaters of the World* (2007). Howell's book, however, does not strive to completely fill this perceived void, as it focuses only on the 70 or so species of albatrosses, petrels and storm-petrels that have had confirmed sightings in North American waters.

Howell should be commended for the effort put into this book. Many readers will simply go straight to the species guides, but Howell spends the first 50 pages of the book advising on 'how-to-use the book,' and this reviewer thoroughly recommends the reading of this introduction, especially for novice seabirders. The introduction covers such topics as: what are tubenoses; taxonomy; field identification, moults and plumages; conservation; and how to see tubenoses. There is also a very handy table at the beginning of the book that gives average weights and wingspan ranges for all the species described. For those that wish to simply skip to a species, however, there is also a list of birds covered in the book and the relevant page reference.

Even after reading the 50 page introduction, the remaining 450 or so pages cover only 76 species, so the species descriptions are very thorough and informative. The vast majority of species described are "visitors" to North American waters (as are most seabirds in Australian waters) and many would be easily recognised by Australian pelagic enthusiasts. Sooty, Short-tailed and Wedge-tailed Shearwaters, amongst many others, are all common visitors to North America in the Australian winter and feature prominently. North American seabirders – if they are willing to travel coast-to-coast – can encounter both Pacific and Atlantic Ocean seabirds. Birds differ markedly between the two oceans and the book covers both oceans' birds well.

Some may question the value of a North American seabird guide for Australian birders, but there are two obvious reasons why this book should capture the interest of Australian birders: firstly, there are seabirds that occur both here and in North America; and secondly, seabirds are, by and large, wide ranging, so vagrants are not uncommon. By way of example, in recent years there have been a number of vagrants from the western hemisphere sighted in Australian waters, including Great Shearwaters (which have been observed spasmodically since the mid-1980s and in significant numbers in early 2011), and a Stejneger's Petrel (also sighted in 2011 off Queensland's Sunshine Coast). Both species are extensively covered by Howell and for this reason alone, it makes the book a worthy addition to an Australian seabirder's library. For this reviewer, another reason to purchase the book is simply to see detailed species accounts of birds that one may never see. It is interesting to see photographs and read about iconic species such as Short-tailed and Galapagos Albatrosses, Pink-footed and Cory's Shearwaters and Murphy's and Zino's Petrel's, plus many others. Howell's coverage of Storm-Petrels, covering 20 species in nearly 100 pages, is also essential reading.

There is very little wrong with this book; it is well written and extensively researched. If there are any 'criticisms,' they are minor in nature, simply matters of personal preference. For instance, Howell has decided to only include distribution maps for species that 'occur regularly' in North American waters. It would have been beneficial to include all species so as to allow the reader a quick reference which identifies where these species normally occur. Howell has also chosen to present a purely photographic guide, so few colour plates are used. He has travelled the world to take the vast majority of photos used. There are obvious limitations to this approach, as few photos capture exactly the same perspective, so it is more difficult to pick the slight differences between closely related species. Lastly, Howell's preference for using his own photos, and his attempts to show specific features of certain birds as comprehensively as possible, mean that the quality of some images has suffered. Whilst the photos do generally illustrate the feature he is describing, one feels that by expanding his photographic sources, he could have achieved even better results.

That said, these are relatively minor quibbles. *Petrels, Albatrosses and Storm-Petrels of North America* is certainly a detailed and comprehensive reference of tubenoses that have occurred in North American waters. Steve Howell has produced an outstanding book, one that is essential reading for all pelagic enthusiasts, regardless of their geographic location.

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