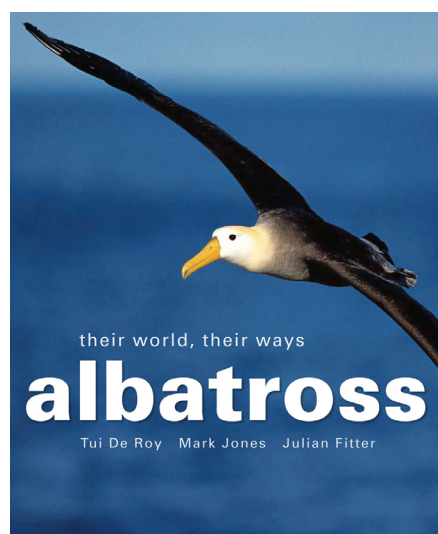


BOOK REVIEW



Albatross: their world, their ways

Tui De Roy, Mark Jones, and Julian Fitter 2008. CSIRO Publishing. Hardback, 232 pp, colour photographs and maps. ISBN 9780643095557. RRP \$79.95.

This book is divided into three parts. The first, entitled 'Spirits of the Oceans Wild' by Tui De Roy reflects her photographer's love of these birds, and assisted by colleagues, it covers all species and occupies 135 pages. The photographs of albatrosses, of which there are over 400, are superb. I doubt whether those who have studied these birds have ever seen them quite the same. The accompanying text is personal and relaxingly informative with cross-references to other sections of considerable information within the book.

The photographs are not just of albatrosses and their courting behaviour, they tell you much more. They show where and how the birds live, and convey the 'feel' of these places. The changing geology and flora of breeding islands in various geographical regions are striking: the lonely tussock of the subantarctic, the flowering plants and trees of the New Zealand subregion, the 'bizarre' topography and vegetation of volcanic Tristan da Cunha, the atolls of the north Pacific. They also show the towering cliffs and ocean swells, wind and overcast skies, and the beauty of distant foraging places.

Section Two, on 'Science and Conservation' comprises short contributions by many of the workers responsible for much of the recent studies. Albatrosses, particularly the Wandering and Royals, are large birds, which could carry the initial loads of the sophisticated instruments that enabled so much to be learned of their flights and migrations. These were pioneering ornithological studies, which continue with considerably lighter and even more sophisticated loads. Much is now known about flight, and the photographs show well the streamlined contours of the body and plumage, that have evolved for their nearly effortless oceanic flights using the winds. So efficiently do they fly that little energy is used.

In the 26 contributions, which cover the various species, are discussed how birds travel the oceans to forage, how and where they forage, and why some are exposed to greater risks than others when they forage. The value of long-term studies spanning 40 years, such as those on South Georgia and the Crozets, are highlighted. The rates of reproduction of albatrosses are slow and for many years populations have been in decline with worrying changes in population structure. The high densities of birds seen at breeding colonies and behind ships can be deceiving. The discussions reveal the complexities of the problem, and solutions to the recent sudden cause of great mortalities, long-line fishing. The summary of the present status of most species presents a depressing picture.

Albatrosses regularly return to the same nesting island and nest site. This reveals a considerable navigational ability, the full nature of which is not understood. A consequence, however, is an isolation of breeding populations, which has favoured the development of new species.

The third section summarises what is known of the 22 southern species, and the four that live in the north of the Pacific Ocean, with brief descriptions and notes on identification, breeding sites, oceanic ranges and population statistics. It is a satisfying conclusion to the book.

It is rare to be able to browse through a book admiring photographs of birds and where they live, while being gently led by the text to the many pioneering studies they have stimulated, to reach a final broad appreciation of their lives. This is achieved in this remarkable book. There should be many admiring readers, many of whom should be stimulated to have a continuing interest in the exciting present of albatross studies but a deep concern for their future. Some will be further stimulated to visit the sites shown, and those suggested, to see albatrosses in the field. Those, who intend to visit subantarctic islands, be warned; it is not always as sunny as shown in the photographs. Researchers, who have studied these birds there, should be able to forget the miseries of wind and rain when relaxing with these photographs.

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