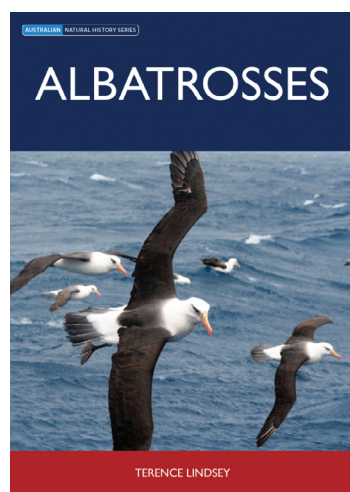


BOOK REVIEW



Albatrosses

Terence Lindsey; principal photographer Rod Morris 2008. CSIRO Publishing. Paperback, 152 pp, colour photographs and black and white illustrations. ISBN 9780643094215. RRP \$39.95.

Terence Lindsey is a professional ornithologist of considerable museum experience who, although not having studied albatrosses in the field, is fascinated by them and has read about them extensively. He reveals his interests, excitement and wonders unashamedly. Consequently, this is a refreshing book to read about albatrosses in general.

Throughout are introduced many concepts, often clarified by comparisons with common Australian birds, as the text is slanted to Australian readers. The contributions of those, who have studied albatrosses far from breeding islands, are well represented. These were the initial studies on non-breeding albatrosses, and many were off the shores of Australia.

An Introduction, which covers the myths and aura of albatrosses over the centuries, is followed by a description of the species, the problems of species definition, and the legal consequences of differing views. Those who study albatrosses in the field recognise great difference in the behaviour of different isolated populations, and consider, that as some of these birds can be recognised by their physical features, they should be viewed as different species. Many of those, who use DNA techniques to seek relationships, have less expansive views but the gap is closing.

Albatrosses search oceans for food, particularly the circumpolar Southern Ocean and the adjacent Atlantic, Indian and Pacific oceans. Four species are found in the northern Pacific Ocean. The oceanic and climatic features are discussed together with the scattered and differing food resources. Sophisticated satellite technologies have enabled much to be learned of albatross behaviour during long flights; to where they fly, the distances covered, how winds are used, the size and frequency of meals. Even flights when feeding chicks may cover several hundreds of kilometres.

Albatrosses breed on remote oceanic islands, most of which are still devoid of major mammalian predators. Here the birds can be conspicuously ashore in safety for long periods, and long stylised courtship behaviours, incubation periods, and fledgling periods, during which the chick is often left alone for days, have evolved. The resultant very large birds can search afar using little energy because their streamlined bodies and the efficiency with which their wing structure captures energy from the wind. Because they are large, they could and still do carry the pioneering technologies, that have enabled so much to be learned in the last 30 years on their movements. These are described in this book.

Albatrosses are long-lived; the large albatrosses may not breed until they are 10–12 years old, and then only breed every two years. They have a slow rate of multiplication, which puts them at great risk when confronted suddenly with great mortalities such as those resulting from long-line fishing. The numbers of some species are now dangerously low. The technical and legal efforts to reduce these mortalities are discussed.

The book introduces the reader to most of studies of the last 30 years and gives an extensive bibliography for those who feel they must read more. The photographs illustrate much more of that described in the text, and have informative captions. The drawings are a pleasant complementary addition. The book is a good introduction to the wonder of these birds, and deserves a wide reading.

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