

REVIEW

A GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF THE ANTARCTIC AND SUB-ANTARCTIC

[Review by John Croxall* of George E. Watson's *Birds of the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic*, Washington, DC, American Geophysical Union, 1975, 350 p. \$15.00.]

It is a pleasure to welcome this long awaited volume by George Watson, which builds on the foundation of the bird folder in the Antarctic Map Folio Series (Folio 14). It will undoubtedly become the standard reference work for all species of birds recorded south of the Antarctic Convergence and on the oceanic islands situated nearby (except Auckland and Campbell islands); the islands of the Tristan da Cunha group, Gough, St Paul and Amsterdam, are also included.

An extensive and admirable general introduction summarizes the principal chemical and physical characteristics of the main water masses in the area, the nature of the vegetation on the island groups, and the salient features and influences of their climate. It is difficult to fault this section, although it is in fact reindeer rather than sheep (p 19) that are responsible for severe tussock destruction on South Georgia.

The birds are introduced with a brief account of their adaptation to the Antarctic climate and a lengthier resumé of general ornithological information. The reader is provided with standard instruction on identification, banding, life cycles, at-sea records, specimen preservation, and a sensible section on conservation. In addition, there is an important analysis of the distribution of seabirds in relation to the main Antarctic and sub-Antarctic life zones, and a consideration of taxonomic differentiation between the successive 'concentric' zones and within the principal sectors of each zone. A reference to N. P. Ashmole's comprehensive review (in D. Farner and J. R. King's *Avian biology. Vol 1*, London, Academic Press, 1971, p 223–86) might have been appropriate.

The species accounts that follow are meticulous compilations presented under the headings: identification, flight and habits, voice and display, food, reproduction, arrival, eggs, hatching, fledging and departure, molt, predation and mortality, ectoparasites, habitat and distribution. A substantial omission is data for means (and ranges) of at least bill dimensions and wing length; this would have greatly improved the book's usefulness for birds in the hand, especially for a critical group such as prions. The minor nature of other criticisms listed below testifies, however, to the overall high quality of this section. The symbol for the breeding Northern Giant Petrel *Macronectes halli* should be a solid square, and in some other maps the symbol for questionable breeding records is difficult to locate (and missing altogether for the Soft-plumaged Petrel *Pterodroma mollis* on Antipodes Island). Although there is still dispute on the topic (see J. Warham in *Notornis*, Vol 22, 1975, p 256–57, and J. W. H. Conroy in *Ardea*, Vol 63, 1975, p 87–92) it might have been useful to summarize details for at-sea identification of the Northern, and Southern *Macronectes giganteus* giant petrels, if only to encourage field observation. The omission of the Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus* is surprising since it has straggled to 50° S in the Atlantic. Diagnostic characteristics for the South Georgia and Kerguelen diving petrels, *Pelecanoides georgicus* and *P. (urinatrix) exsul*, are greatly overemphasized. The Kerguelen Diving Petrel shows very variable grey throat-mottling and often only the palest grey underwing coverts. Many individuals have white-tipped scapulars and indeed few, if any, South Georgia Diving Petrels show as much as the plate indicates, which more resembles the Magellan Diving Petrel *P. magellani*. The greatest caution should be exercised in identifying these species in the hand, let alone at sea.

The book goes on to summarize the distribution of each seabird species, at sea and on all islands and land masses within the book's scope, as a preliminary to the 'gazeteer' section. Much of this last section, which includes geographical accounts of the land masses and islands, and information on their history, geomorphology, climate and botany, has limited direct ornithological

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relevance. Finally, there is a list of over 300 references and a useful breakdown of these according to geographic area and taxonomic group, although it is sometimes difficult to identify the source of any particular piece of information. Inevitably, fresh facts come to light during publication—the breeding of the Blue Petrel *Halobaena caerulea*, for example, and the rediscovery of the Grey-backed Storm Petrel *Garrodia nereis* at South Georgia (Prince and Payne, in preparation); or the straggling of the Great-winged Petrel *Pterodroma macroptera* to near, and the Soft-plumaged Petrel across, the Antarctic Convergence in Drake Passage (R. G. B. Brown and others, in *Ibis*, Vol 117, 1975, p 339–56)—but it would be difficult to imagine a guide that has taken better account of the literature.

Notwithstanding all that is excellent in the book, I feel some dissatisfaction with it on two counts. The line drawings are admirable but the colour plates are not up to the standard we have come to expect from field guides at this price. Individual illustrations are too small; many lack the essential 'jizz' of a species and do not bring out clearly its diagnostic characteristics—a danger perhaps inherent in the 'vignette' style of some plates. Also, the plates do contain some inaccuracies, mainly trivial, but not helpful to the inexperienced observer. For example, the neck colour of the Emperor Penguin *Aptenodytes forsteri* and the size and colour of the shag caruncles are poorly rendered; the dark W on the upperwings of Soft-plumaged and White-headed *Pterodroma lessoni* petrels is invisible; and the tail of the Short-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus tenuirostris* is proportionately much too long and its greyish underwings over-emphasized.

The second problem is that the book's scope is not limited to the more easily definable boundary of the Antarctic Convergence and the 'transitional zone' sub-Antarctic islands associated with it. Since some temperate sub-Antarctic islands have been included (Tristan da Cunha, St Paul, Amsterdam) it is difficult to understand the omission of other areas (eg off New Zealand and Patagonia) associated with the cold and transitional sub-Antarctic sub-zones. The book would then have covered a further range of seabirds, some belonging to species groups already extensively covered in the text, that many visitors to sub-Antarctic waters would be likely to come across, such as Buller's Albatross *Diomedea bulleri*, the South American Tern *Sterna hirundinacea*, and various shags and gulls.

In conclusion, this is the best guide to the birds of the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic yet available and, as a compendium, outstanding. However, a really first-class *field* guide to the seabirds of the area is still awaited.

IN BRIEF

THE POLAR MEDAL

The *London Gazette* of 23 February brought the long awaited news that the Polar Medal has been awarded posthumously to Hugh Blackwall Evans. The announcement of the award, 'for outstanding service as a member of the 1898–1900 Southern Cross Expedition', comes nearly 77 years after Mr Evans's return from the Antarctic and almost exactly a year after his death, at the age of 100, on 8 February 1975. The award had, however, been recommended before his death.

He is the only man to have received the Polar Medal for service on the Southern Cross Expedition; the medal did not exist at the time and was first awarded to members of Scott's *Discovery* expedition in 1904. Prior to that, medals had been awarded only for Arctic service.

The same announcement also carried news of the award of the Polar Medal, 'for outstanding services as members of the British Antarctic Survey', to the following:

Peter David Clarkson, Geologist 1968–69
 Captain Maurice John Cole, Ship's Master 1960–72
 John Richard Dudeney, Ionosphericist 1967–68
 William Alan Etchells, Mechanic 1967–68
 Dr Inigo Everson, Marine Biologist 1965–66
 Dr Richard Maitland Laws, Biologist 1948–49