

News and notices

BOOK REVIEWS

ANDY BROWN & PHIL GRICE 2005. *Birds in England*. T. & A.D. Poyser, London. ISBN 0-7136-6530-0, hardback, 694 pp. 50 colour photographs. Price £40.

This is the first book to be written on the birds of England, which is quite surprising given other country (Wales, Ireland, Scotland) avifaunas have been available for many years. It took some time to get used to thinking about England as opposed to Britain as an ornithological area but the authors have done very well to keep the focus on England throughout. This is a monumental book: 700 pages, 50 photographs and numerous line drawings throughout. The authors, Andy Brown and Phil Grice, who both hold senior posts at English Nature, the statutory nature conservation agency in England (the other UK countries have their own agencies), have done a tremendous job in digesting so much information into a well-written, concise and fact-filled book. Their rigorous scientific background and genuine enthusiasm for birds shines through in the introductory chapters and species accounts, and the reference list of over 50 pages is testimony to how well researched the book is.

Following a brief introduction, a chapter entitled 'The composition and character of the English avifauna' spans 29 pages, and covers subjects such as English birds in a global context, migration, weather and climate change. This is an impressive chapter with 34 tables summarising facts and figures relating to the English avifauna such as new breeding species, species that have gone extinct as breeders, subspecies restricted as breeding birds to England and adjacent areas (e.g. Razorbill *Alca torda islandica*), early and late migrant dates, exceptional visible migration counts, exceptional falls (e.g. Holme, Norfolk September 1993), and autumn influxes of Nearctic waders. For the seabird enthusiast, a table details 12 notable English seawatches to demonstrate the variation in species composition and numbers of seabirds that pass our coastal headlands. For example, 77,500 Kittiwakes passed Flamborough, Yorkshire on 21 August 1988, 20,000+ Gannets passed St Ives, Cornwall, on 3 September 1983 with 20-50,000 Manx Shearwaters on the same day are some of the most notable counts. Another fascinating table, and one which I will refer to regularly in my work, is of 'Unusual avian events in England 1900-2000', which includes the incident of hundreds of seabirds being killed during a hailstorm on 2 July 1914 in Teesmouth, Cleveland, the exceptional inland

passage of Common and Arctic Terns in 1947, the influx of Grey Phalaropes and Sabine's Gulls in the storms of 1987, and the largest passage of Cory's Shearwaters in Cornwall in 1998.

The chapter on 'Bird habitats in England' is extremely thorough, supported by tables and maps that make this section very easy to dip into and glean information. Sections on sea cliffs (20% of England's coastline), rocky shores (10% of the coastline) and the open sea discuss our knowledge of these habitats and their characteristic fauna. Data sources such as Operation Seafarer, the Seabird Colony Register and Seabird 2000 are drawn upon here and throughout the species accounts. The conservation and future of these environments is discussed, highlighting the need for further research into temporal variation in the use of inshore waters, on the distribution and numbers of seaduck, divers and grebes, and on the feeding ecology of different age classes of seabirds and their interactions with fisheries. Problems of overfishing, pollution, oil spills and aggregate extraction are all covered in some depth.

A short chapter introduces the species accounts and outlines their scope – such as the species included, those species excluded, geographical coverage (excludes Channel Islands, Flatholm and Isle of Man), and survey and surveillance sources used. The species accounts cover the period up to the end of 2000, although Chapter 6 includes species new to England and the rarest of vagrants and exceptional events in the period 1 January 2001 to 31 August 2004 (for example, 2,674 Sooty Shearwaters passed Flamborough, Yorkshire on 22 September 2002). The main species accounts vary in length and the authors have dedicated more space to species of conservation concern or where there have been significant changes in populations or distribution. Each account starts with a review of the species' European and British status before discussing the numbers and distribution in England, simple ecology and any conservation issues. Sensibly, records of vagrants are summarised unless there are just a handful of records in which case they are all listed. No reference is made to the Hastings Rarities in these accounts. It is a shame that no distribution maps are included but this is completely understandable. The accounts for Lesser Black-backed Gull and Herring Gull are particularly interesting. Here, they document changing breeding status and habits, especially the recent expansion onto roof tops for nesting and migratory movements. I was a little disappointed that *Larus argentatus cachinnans* was simply described as a "scarce autumn and winter visitor to central and southeastern England", which is a rather simplified description. Many of the accounts have very useful tables documenting historical and recent status by county, for example Arctic Tern and Little Tern. For the Gannet, a table shows

the long-term changes in status at Lundy and Bempton from 1919 to 1999, with information on world population estimates for those years.

For the conservationist or scientist, one of the most useful tables is the 'Annotated checklist of birds in England: population, conservation and legal status', which forms Appendix 1. The population status, breeding population estimate, global and European threat category, SPEC category, Red or Amber list status amongst other information, are listed for all species on the English list.

Overall, this is an excellent book and one that I will use over and over again. I would recommend it to anyone with an interest in birds in England. Congratulations must go to the authors who have produced a first-class book.

Dawn Balmer

ONLEY, D. & SCOFIELD, P. 2007. *Field Guide to the Albatrosses, Petrels and Shearwaters of the World*. Christopher Helm, London. ISBN 978-0-7136-4332-9, 240pp, many illustrations. £19.99.

In the last few years there have been dramatic changes in the classification of several groups within the procellariiforms, based primarily on new DNA sequence data. There are now 24 species of albatross rather than the 13 you will find in Peter Harrison's seabird identification guide and the Hoyo *et al.* Handbook of the Birds of the World, none of which is now called a wandering albatross; and there has been considerable rearrangement and splitting in other groups such as the little and Manx shearwaters. Apparently the little shearwaters I ringed in the Cape Verde Islands a few years ago are now Audubon's shearwaters, while the Audubon's shearwaters I saw in the Galapagos on an ecotourism trip are now Galapagos shearwaters. The little shearwaters I caught on Gough Island are now a separate new species, the sub-Antarctic little shearwater, while those I used to ring in the Azores are now Macaronesian shearwaters. Fortunately, the little shearwaters of New Zealand still count as little shearwaters. But I for one am quite confused by all these changes, particularly since the Audubon's shearwaters of the Cape Verde islands have blue legs, which Peter Harrison pointed out distinguishes the little shearwater from the pink-legged Audubon's shearwater. Apparently the DNA tells us otherwise, however, and leg colour is no longer diagnostic for these taxa.

So Onley and Scofield's new field guide is a very useful book. It takes on the highly challenging task of illustrating and describing the diagnostic features of the currently accepted species of procellariiforms. In a few cases

this is almost an impossible task, as plumages of some species really cannot be distinguished, despite the newly discovered clear differences in DNA. The resulting field guide has much that is praiseworthy. The illustrations are extremely fine, with a tendency to understate characteristic features of species rather than to emphasise them. This I think does help the observer. The layout of illustrations is also carefully thought out, and the range of upper and underside views, age variations and plumage morphs is well covered. The illustrations are all of birds in flight, the assumption being that the guide will be used at sea rather than at breeding colonies. The book is softback but printed on glossy paper that feels as if it would stand up well to splashes of seawater. How long it will remain a definitive guide may depend on the stability of procellariiform taxonomy in the next few years. I suspect that several groups may still be ripe for revisions and splitting, such as some of the storm-petrels in particular.

The species texts provide a detailed, accurate, and impressively up to date summary of taxonomy, distribution, plumage (including effects of moult and wear) and identification, with a very brief comment on behaviour (at sea). Each species account also contains a map, showing breeding colonies in orange and main at-sea distribution in green. Although many of these maps seem fine to me, quite a number contain inaccuracies, often even conflicting with the text on distribution. Perhaps some of the maps were prepared in haste, and certainly they were not thoroughly checked for accuracy. Dots to mark sub-Antarctic islands seem to have been added carelessly, so that Tristan da Cunha appears east of Bouvet in the southern giant petrel map, the dot for Kerguelen petrel seems to place Gough Island closer to Cape Town than to the correct position, and the dot for Antarctic petrel on Bouvet looks as if it indicates breeding on Gough Island. The northern fulmar map does not indicate breeding in Svalbard or Bear Island or northern Greenland. Antarctic prion is shown as breeding on Tristan or Gough, which it does not. White-chinned petrel is shown as breeding on Tristan, which it does not (because the Tristan population is now considered to be spectacled petrel, a new endemic species). Leach's storm-petrel is not indicated as breeding in Scotland, although the text does give a detailed list of colonies including those in Scotland. The poor quality of the maps detracts slightly from an otherwise very fine book.

I have rather few quibbles with the generally excellent text. Dickinson (2003) is cited early in the book as the authority for the species sequence followed, yet the reference is missing from the short reference list at the end. Several species of albatross are said not to follow fishing vessels, and these include the waved albatross, a species in rapid decline at present due to longline by-catch off Ecuador and Peru, and the short-tailed albatross, a species often found attending longline vessels off Alaska, so I'm not convinced that these

species are not attracted to fishing boats. Various tables of measurements are included in the book, but without information on whether they were taken from live or museum specimens, what the sample sizes were, and when and how the birds were sampled. I realise that there is limited space for such details, but it makes it difficult to use these tables of data without such information. But overall, this book is very useful and timely, and should be high on the wish list for anyone with a strong interest in seabirds.

Bob Furness