Flight identification of European seabirds

Blomdahl, A., Briefe, B. & Holmström, N. 2003. London: Christopher Helm. 364 pp. with 695 glossy colour photographs and one map. Soft cover. ISBN 0-7136-6020-1. UK£35.

Flight identification of European seabirds presents an extraordinary collection of photographs of birds in flight at sea. The book begins with some brief notes on how to identify birds at sea, along with a plea to leave the genuinely unidentifiable as "unidentified." A list of good sea-watching sites in Europe (including Madeira and the Azores) follows. The remainder of the book is taken up with species accounts for all waterbirds that might be seen on the sea (dabbling ducks and geese in addition to the usual seabirds, but not shorebirds—not even phalaropes).

Species accounts cover 92 species, each spread over one to five pages and including up to 11 photographs of various plumages, angles or flight positions. Vagrant species in European waters are generally treated in a single page (e.g. Double-crested Cormorant *Phalacrocorax auritus,* Red-billed Tropicbird *Phaethon aethereus*), but the length of an account is determined mainly by the variety of plumages and the difficulty of identification. The gulls generally receive more extended treatment than the shearwaters, for example. The Arctic Skua (Parasitic Jaeger) *Stercorarius parasiticus*, with its variable adult plumage, gets the longest account. Surprisingly, the highly variable Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis,* gets only four pictures, all but one of the typical West European type.

The quality of the photographs and the production is very high. More than 110 photographers contributed to the book. From perusal of the plates, much can be learned about details of plumage that would be almost impossible to pick out in the flurry of action in a field situation and about the way in which various species use their flight surfaces. It is striking, for example, how much more variable the wing shapes of gulls can be than those of shearwaters. I wonder how much technological advances, such as image stabilization, auto-focus lenses and digital enhancement software have contributed to bringing this type of photo essay within reach. Identification of birds in the field is an art as much as a science. One person can distinguish loons easily by their wing-beats, while another can judge proportions to a nicety to distinguish Madeiran Storm-Petrels *Oceanodroma castro* from Leach's Storm-Petrels *O. leucorhoa.* Others are still struggling to make such distinctions after prolonged experience with the species. Consequently, you can usually find someone who will dispute almost any generalisation about species identification. That being so, I will not take issue with particular points of the text, but simply say that, overall, where I was familiar with the species involved, the text notes appeared accurate and pertinent.

But how useful is such a birder's guide to the working scientist? Very useful indeed, I would argue. Accurate identification is essential to any research or conservation study, and assessing age, sex or population of origin for an individual bird can greatly magnify the value of particular observations. I am aware of similar guides to marine birds at sea for coastal areas of North America, but nothing approaching this rigour and completeness. The book should be of value to anyone working on birds at sea in the North Atlantic. For the gulls, Olsen and Larsson's (2003) guide (see below), which combines fine paintings with extensive photographic studies, is more detailed and illustrates an even more extensive range of plumages, but as a single volume to take on any journey at sea, the current volume is a great starting point.

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Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America

Olsen, K.M. & Larsson, H. 2003. London: Christopher Helm. 608 pp. with 83 colour plates, more than 1000 colour photographs and 43 colour maps. Hard cover. ISBN 0-7136-4377-3. UK£45.

Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America is part of the "Helm Identification Guide" series. Like all the volumes in that series, it is nicely produced and illustrated. The first of the series that I purchased was Peter Harrison's (1983) *Seabirds: An Identification Guide.* At the time it was a major step forward in the information available for identifying seabirds, but it covered 312 species in 448 pages. The volume under review deals with just 43 of those species in 30% more pages. Such is the progress of field ornithology. In fact the difference in species count is even greater, because Olsen and Larsson deal with five species included by Harrison within the Herring Gull *Larus argentatus,* including treating American Herring Gull as a separate species *Larus smithsonianus.* It is unfortunate that the authors did not go the whole way and include the additional dozen or so species of gull that would have allowed them to make this a book of "gulls of the world."

The sheer wealth of illustrations is almost overwhelming (four plates and 36 photographs of *Larus fuscus* alone!) and, as in Blomdahl *et al.* (above), the quality is excellent. Whereas Blomdahl *et al.* concentrated exclusively on pictures of birds in flight, this volume covers birds at rest and in flight, both in plates and in photographs. In keeping with this much more intensive treatment, Olsen and Larsson include even more plumages and geographic variations than Blomdahl *et al.* do. The effect is extremely discouraging, because it gave me, at least, the impression that almost any of the large gulls could be mistaken for another in some plumage. However, given this collection, people now have no excuse for putting forward out-of-range records on the basis of descriptions that do not exclude races or plumages of species occurring on the other side of the planet.

In addition to the pictures, each species gets from two to 10 pages of text, dealing with identification, plumage, moult, distribution and migration, and a rather garish colour-coded map taking up as much as half a page. Unfortunately, the projection chosen for most maps is one that squishes the polar latitudes, making the distributions of Arctic gulls rather difficult to make out. I had quite a few problems with the maps, which continue the European tradition of being surprisingly inaccurate on North American distributions. The *Birds of North America* maps are probably responsible for some of this, because those that appeared in early species accounts in particular were often lacking in detail as compared with similar maps for Europe. Still, there is no excuse for the gross exaggeration of range shown in the map for Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla,* which suggests a continuous distribution along the Alaska–Yukon coast from the Chukchi Sea to the mouth of the Mackenzie River, as well as non-existent colonies on Ellesmere Island, southeast Alaska and the Queen Charlotte Islands—areas for which much detailed information is available.

Population estimates are given for all species, although the references are frustratingly sketchy. To give a couple of examples, the estimate of 150 000 pairs for the *Larus smithsonianus* must be mainly a guess, given the huge extent and inaccessibility of much of the species' range. I also have to wonder how confident the estimate of "less than 50 000 pairs" can be for *L. cirrocephalus*—a species widespread in West Africa in areas where civil unrest makes ornithology difficult to pursue.

One problem that this book shares with that of Blomdahl *et al.* is that some photographs are taken in wintering areas, or out of range, where several similar species overlap. Hence, we have to trust that the photographs are actually correctly identified. No doubt the photographers had much better information available to them than is evident from a single photograph, but I do get an uneasy feeling that, at the level of distinction being made here, an element of circularity may exist in using these plates to identify out-of-range individuals or difficult age classes. This problem is likely to persist until we have the means to make DNA determinations at a distance—surely something that is not far over the horizon. Finally, I still have not seen, in either book, illustrations of the distinctive second and third-summer wing patterns of *L. hyperboreus* and *L. glaucoides kumlieni*—a very surprising omission.

Olsen and Larsson is an excellent book to keep in your library for reference, or to take out when you are going to a known hot-spot for gulls. However, the imperfections in the maps and the rather cavalier use of population data lead to reservations about the value of the book as a research tool. For identification, though, this book, along with Blomdahl *et al.,* helps to take seabird identification to a new level.

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