

Albatrosses

Lindsey, T. 2008. Collingwood, Australia: Australian Natural History Series, CSIRO Publishing. 139 pp., 19 color (plus 5 black and white) photographs, 7 illustrations, 1 Figure and 2 Tables in an Appendix. Soft cover. ISBN 9780643094215. AU\$39.95.

Albatrosses by Terence Lindsey is a delightful addition to the Australian Natural History Series which has produced comprehensive accounts of species or groups of animals in a format accessible to non-specialists and naturalists alike for the past 10 years. Lindsey's goal is to convey the "essence" of this extraordinary group of birds to a wider (non-seabird) audience. He convincingly achieves this by focusing on the biological and life history features, exquisitely evolved and often extreme, that set albatrosses apart from other seabirds. The book has 8 chapters; the first entitled "Myth and Legend" sets the stage. Albatrosses in general, and the Great albatrosses (*Diomedea* spp.) in particular, simply capture the imagination. They are the world's largest flying seabirds, they have the longest wingspans and lowest measured cost of flight; indeed, as Lindsey convincingly details, it is the evolution of fast, efficient flight that has been key to their mastery of the open oceans.

The middle chapters, 2 through 7, review "The species", "The Habitat (The Southern Ocean)", "Food and Foraging", "Flight", "Courtship", and "The Nesting Cycle". These chapters are engagingly and informatively written and accompanied by beautiful color photographs. Readers are introduced to 4 groups (including 13 species and 11 subspecies) – the Great albatrosses *Diomedea*, the Mollymawks *Thalassarche*, the North Pacific albatrosses *Phoebastria* and the Sooties *Phoebetria* – without becoming unnecessarily tangled in recent taxonomic debates. Also introduced are the extreme life-history characteristics of albatrosses – long life spans, delayed onset of maturity, elaborate courtship rituals and extended periods of pair bond formation. But it is in the arena of foraging and flight where albatrosses are most impressive; no other animals can move as fast, cover such vast distances and sustain trajectories for such extended periods of time. A male Grey-headed Albatross *Thalassarche chrysostoma*, for example, circumnavigated the Southern Ocean in just 46 days, travelling upwards of 750 km per day to accomplish this amazing feat (Croxall et al. 2005). Lindsey concisely summarizes current information on albatross foraging and flight performance, an area where understanding has increased dramatically over the past 15 years due to miniaturization of bird-borne data loggers.

Within these middle chapters, I did however feel that, in an effort to generalize, the author sometimes favored the extreme (which is depicted by the Great albatrosses), and made some (minor) errors as a result. For example, he says that squid predominates in the diet of all albatross species, closely followed by fish. However, fish predominates in chick diets of Black-footed *Phoebastria nigripes*, Black-browed *Thalassarche melanophrys*, Yellow-nosed *T. chlororhynchos* and Shy *T. cauta* albatrosses (Cherel & Klages 1998, Hedd & Gales 2001). Comprehensively covering the topics introduced in chapters 2-7, and noting the particulars for each species is, however, clearly not the intent of this book. Interested readers could consult more comprehensive volumes (Warham 1990, 1996; Tickell 2000; Brooke 2004) or the supporting primary literature cited by Lindsey for further information.

Much of the intensive research and recent public focus on albatrosses has resulted, sadly, from their poor conservation status, albatrosses being the world's most threatened family of birds.

Lindsey therefore appropriately culminates his book with a chapter on "Human Impacts". While historical carnage was initially exacted when birds were harvested for food and bait and later for eggs and feathers, their current plight is mainly a consequence of incidental mortality in longline and trawl fisheries. Albatrosses are global in their distribution, and as a consequence much fishery-related mortality takes place in international waters; protecting them has therefore required international action and cooperation. Lindsey points out that effective mitigation strategies do exist, although the challenge is to ensure that these are applied appropriately to manage longline fisheries in areas where albatrosses and fisheries overlap. Development of international treaties and agreements such as the ACAP (Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels) which are instrumental to improving the conservation status of these magnificent seabirds could have usefully been discussed in this final chapter.

The author's unmistakable passion for albatrosses shines through from the opening pages of the book, and his enthusiasm is contagious. It quickly re-ignited the thrill I felt when first seeing Shy Albatrosses wheel in the winds off northern Tasmania. Overall, this book does precisely what it sets out to do – it effectively captures the essence of these majestic birds, providing a very readable introduction to albatrosses for anyone interested in their natural history and conservation.

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