

Book Review

Petrels, Albatrosses & Storm-Petrels of North America.—Steve N. G. Howell. 2012. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. 483 pp. ISBN 978-0-691-14211-1. Cloth, \$45.00.

This very large book is reminiscent of several recently published books—*Gulls of North America, Europe, and Asia*, by Klaus Malling Olsen and Hans Larsson (2002); *Gulls of the Americas*, by Steve N. G. Howell and Jon Dunn (2007); and *The Shorebird Guide*, by Michael O'Brien, Richard Crossley, and Kevin Karlson (2006). Like them, *Petrels, Albatrosses & Storm-Petrels of North America* relies heavily on photographs, with each species typically represented by ten or more photos, mainly of individuals in flight. However, for most of these “tubenose” species (Order *Procellariiformes*), Howell includes photos of the species on the water with other species, for excellent side-by-side comparisons. There are also fairly detailed species accounts, roughly three or four pages in length for each species, along with range maps for most, including notation of the months of occurrence in selected parts of the range.

The author has spent many days travelling on pelagic trips out of Hatteras and Oregon inlets, NC, in addition to much field work in California, his home base. As a result, birders from North Carolina will be especially captivated by the hundreds of photos from that state in the book; most were taken by the author. Unlike with shorebirds, and more like with gulls, the taxonomy of tubenoses—the subject of the book—is still quite uncertain, and species splits have occurred in recent years, with more certainly to come in the near future. For example, the taxonomy of the Fea's (*Pterodroma feae*) and Zino's (*P. madeira*) Petrels is unsettled, as the former may consist of more than one species. Band-rumped Storm-Petrel (*Oceanodroma castro*) may consist of several species, at least two of which occur in the western Atlantic. An author of a book has free rein to designate and name whatever taxa he wants as full species or subspecies, and is free to split or lump as he pleases. For better or worse, Howell is clearly a splitter, and he assigns a current subspecies of Cory's Shearwater as a full species, the Scopoli's Shearwater (*Calonectris [diomedea] diomedea*). In fact, according to the author, this form occurs in some numbers in North Carolina waters; he states (page 113) that “Off North Carolina in May–Jun, no more than 5–10% of *Calonectris* shearwaters appear to be Scopoli's, but in Aug perhaps as many as 10–15% may be Scopoli's”. Hey, many of us have seen Scopoli's Shearwaters, without even knowing it!

I noted one error relating to the status of a species on the North Carolina list. On page 310, Howell lists records of Black-browed Albatross (*Thalassarche melanophris*) from Labrador, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Maine, Massachusetts, Virginia, and Martinique; but he then incorrectly states “... Additional sightings from Newfoundland s to Florida ... are not accepted, but some may be correct.” The NC Bird Records Committee has

long accepted a sight record of this species (onto the Provisional List) of two birds off Morehead City on 19 Aug 1972 (*Am. Birds* 27:739–740). I was one of six or seven experienced seabird observers on that trip who saw the birds. On page 271, Howell states that “A White-chinned Petrel was seen ... off North Carolina...”, on two dates in mid-October 1996. Though this report was not accepted by the NC Bird Records Committee, as he correctly states, I agree with Howell, Ned Brinkley, and Brian Patteson (who are mentioned on page 271) that “... it is difficult to imagine what else the bird could have been (the photo supported identification as a dark *Procellaria* petrel...)”. Nonetheless, I am concerned that he “accepts” the observation as “fact”, when it is not even on the state’s Accepted List. An author is free to be a “one-man records committee”, but by doing so he is setting himself up for criticism.

This book will undoubtedly be considered a major landmark in seabird literature. It is better for an author to be a splitter than a lumper, in the sense that we get a very thorough treatment, both in photos and text, of all the possible forms of Band-rumped Storm-Petrel, Leach’s Storm-Petrel (*O. leucorhoa*), and the many small black and white shearwaters (*Puffinus* spp.) off the West Coast, as examples. He even has photos and some text on all of the extralimital species, such as various albatrosses, and thus it would pay seabirders to carefully study photos in the book before heading out on a pelagic trip. Of course, this book will need to be taken aboard, but as it has a hard cover that is not waterproof, you will need to store it carefully inside the cabin; you simply cannot afford to let this “tome” get wet! Despite my griping a bit at Howell for perhaps putting the cart before the horse, in terms of taxonomic treatment, this book is an exceptional work—just the photos alone are worth the price of the book. And, I admire not only Howell but all of the other photographers of pelagic birds, as obtaining high-quality photos of these quickly dashing species from a moving, rocking vessel is one of the most difficult aspects of ornithological documentation.

—Harry LeGrand