

REVIEWS



The Gull Next Door: A Portrait of a Misunderstood Bird By Marianne Taylor. Princeton University Press, Princeton. 2020. ISBN 9780691208961. 192 pages, 17 black and white illustrations. Hardback, £19.99.

Early on in *The Gull Next Door*, author Marianne Taylor declares that she is “not a true, hardcore larophile”. Don’t be deceived though; she clearly knows her stuff about gulls, and her deep affection for these birds is apparent throughout this entertaining and expansive book. *The Gull Next Door* uses the author’s own experiences as jumping off points to cover everything from gull evolution and physiology to the biodiversity crisis. We begin in Hastings, with the author rescuing rooftop-nesting Herring Gulls *Larus argentatus* in her childhood home. Indeed, we even learn that she had a letter published in the *Hastings Observer* at the age of nine, voicing her opposition to a gull cull. Later on, we discover that she could hardly sleep without the noise of gulls when she went to university in Sheffield, and we find out about the gulls she’s encountered at many other stages of her life. These accounts give the book a deeply personal feel, which is amplified by the use of the author’s own illustrations throughout the chapters, which really capture the character the species concerned, and convey the extent to which the author must have watched and studied each.

The book is made up of a prologue, followed by eight chapters. These kick off with a look at ‘Britain’s Gulls’, where we are given a brief introduction to each of the species that breed in Britain, apart from the Herring Gull.

As the author’s favourite gull, this species later has a chapter devoted to it alone. The other chapters mostly consider the relationships between people and gulls, with a look at gulls in global folklore and modern culture, how gulls have been persecuted across the years and the threats they face now, and tips for living alongside them.

Although the author is clearly enamoured by gulls, she doesn’t shy away from their less becoming characteristics. The reader learns, for example, about the Kelp Gulls *L. dominicanus* of Guafo Island, Chile, which have developed such a taste for hookworm larvae that they can hardly wait for the South American Fur Seals *Arctocephalus australis* pups harbouring them to defecate, resulting in “many baby seals with nasty perineal injuries”. However, these unpleasant details are balanced by the comprehensive information she gives on the more redeeming and fascinating aspects of gull behaviour, ecology and physiology, and overall, the author’s love and admiration for gulls is infectious, as is her fear for them.

The general style of the book is conversational and humorous. The language is anthropocentric, using terms such as ‘flirting’, ‘boyfriend’ and ‘babies’ when setting out gull breeding behaviour, for example. I found this amusing rather than grating, and I expect this style makes the range of terminology inevitably encountered (especially in the more scientific sections) accessible, which must help readers with only a passing interest in gulls and the natural world to stay engaged and even become converts. There is the occasional slip in the accuracy of some of the details (for

example, the Herring Gull joined the UK's Birds of Conservation Concern Red List in 2009, not 2002 as the book states), but such mistakes are only minor and shouldn't detract from the overall enjoyment of the book or the author's accomplishment in bringing so much information together in such an appealing way.

The book ends with a rallying cry to protect the natural world. The author draws parallels between human attitudes towards gulls and those towards other species, including mammalian predators and birds of prey, many of which have since become locally extinct thanks to their tendency to impinge on human spaces and lifestyles. She suggests that familiarity (with gulls living in urban

spaces) can breed admiration, and help keep humans in touch with the natural world on which we depend, giving us cause to protect it. The book's postscript, written just as the Covid-19 pandemic was taking hold, and heavily referencing the climate crisis, says "we are going to need our wildlife to help get us out of this mess". As a larophile myself, I hope Marianne Taylor's book challenges and changes the perceptions of some readers to gulls and other 'undesirable animals', and if that is part of a broader shift towards improving the lot of gulls and seabirds in general, then I'd be delighted. Either way, I admire the author's ambition, and recommend her book.

Viola Ross-Smith

Seabirds: The New Identification Guide

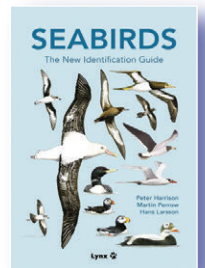
By Peter Harrison, Martin Perrow, Hans Larsson. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona. 2021. ISBN 9788416728411. 600 pages, 239 plates with 3,800+ colour illustrations; colour distribution maps. Hardback, £74.99.

I remember the excitement of the release of Peter Harrison's *Seabirds: An Identification Guide* in 1983 and have eagerly anticipated the publication of this update to the original classic. Covering all known seabirds of the world, the scope and ambition of the authors is very impressive. The book describes 434 species across nine orders and 18 families that "spend part or all of their lives interacting with the ocean (especially as a source of food) and not just migrating over it".

The introduction to the book includes sections on: the definition of a seabird introducing the 25 groups; the basics of seabird ID; *How to use this book*; glossary of terms; seabird topology and world maps showing sites cited in the species accounts. The 'groups' section has a brief introductory paragraph, a representative thumbnail image and the plate numbers

which I found greatly aids navigation of the book. The section on the basics of identification covers all things to look for to help identify a seabird, including preparation for time in the field.

Seabirds: The New Identification Guide presents species in taxonomic order divided into 25 groups representing families or sub-families including recent amendments to taxonomy. Each seabird group has a 1–8 page introductory section followed by the individual species accounts. Group introductions contain useful identification information tailored for each group with paragraphs on such things as location; head and bill pattern and shape; wing patterns; moult and ageing; and size and jizz. The introductions for some groups, such as frigatebirds, include extra detail showing a comparative key with thumbnails of birds in flight showing the stages in plumage development and other morphs for some species. In the group gadfly petrels there are figures showing in-flight undersides of each species; underwing scoring system and polymorphism in one species. Tailoring the details and structure of group introductions is very welcome and helpful.



Seabirds: The New Identification Guide has a much improved layout over the original. The 239 plates are now opposite the associated species accounts text on the facing page, so everything for each species is displayed within the open two-page spread which greatly improves readability. There is a short introduction to each plate including regional and species specific information. The systematic order of species accounts closely follow that of the *HBW and BirdLife International Checklist of the Birds of the World* (del Hoyo & Collar 2014) and the *IOC World Bird List* adjusted for any differences between the two, also incorporating recent or anticipated splits. Each species account is titled with its preferred English name with any variants in parentheses, followed by its scientific name and under this are common names in French, German and Spanish. The species introduction contains details of regional distribution and conservation status according to *BirdLife International/IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* with numbers of pairs where relevant. The embedded distribution maps are updated from *HBW and BirdLife International Checklist of the Birds of the World* where species splits have been revised. A condensed biology for the species follows which includes details of habit, breeding times, dispersal and foraging areas. The identification paragraph starts with a snapshot description of the bird, including its jizz and voice. This is followed by greater details of the plumage of adult, juvenile and immature birds including any temporal changes. The confusion species paragraph lists any species that could be confused, providing a comparative summary and checklist of features to help separate these species. These details are clearly derived from long hours in the field identifying

seabirds. The text throughout is fairly sparse in a note form in order to maximise the amount of information provided, the authors are to be commended on the amount of information they have managed to fit in a limited space. I think it was a good decision to include all species of a group where some of these are not sea-going, such as for the cormorants.

The plates are a joy. Each species is depicted in all its plumages varying by age, gender and subspecies. Where appropriate, there is a mix of images of the birds standing, in flight and on the water. The in-flight images show the underside and upperside of plumage including any temporal differences. The images are labelled appropriately with age, stage, sex or subspecies with associated key identification notes for identification features next to images. These notes reflect or summarise the important content of the species text. The contents of plates are also sized to match the identification challenges, with some more difficult species including more images.

With its size it is not a strictly a field guide, being too large to fit the average pocket, however maybe would be ideal on a boat. I think it is a reference work positioned somewhere between field guide and handbook. There is a wealth of succinct information in this book. If you have the original should you buy this one? I would say "yes", it is a comprehensive and definitive guide for the identification of seabirds. Also it reflects the many changes to taxonomy since the publication of the original due to advances in both technology and further detailed research.

Jeff Stratford