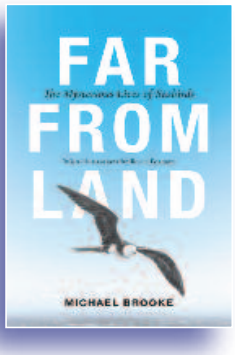
REVIEWS



Far from Land: the Mysterious Life of Seabirds By Michael Brooke. Illustrated by Bruce Pearson. Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ. 2018. ISBN 978-0-691-17418-1. 256 pages, numerous colour photographs and maps, and wash drawings of seabirds. Hardback, £24.95.

An impressive global overview of impressive modern research into what prove to be even more impressive seabirds. Science in detail, enhanced by a sense of wonder and personal insights. Scientists in action, enlivened with glimpses of their personality. Altogether a well-written, finely illustrated, instructively mapped book.

The author acknowledges that his book relies on "the industry of a worldwide community of hundreds of researchers". He goes on to survey how "the level of understanding of how seabirds live out their lives away from the apparent comfort of land is growing in a truly remarkable manner." The tracking and monitoring devices are clearly explained, including "geolocators, miraculous packets of electronics now smaller than a broad bean".

The scope of the book is best outlined by citing chapter headings (here abbreviated), namely: past knowledge and new revelations; seabirds' first journeys; meandering years of immaturity; adult migrations; adult movements during the breeding season; impacts of wind and waves; finding food; catching food; and clashes with people, whether long-line fishermen and albatrosses in southern oceans, or jet-skiers and auks on the North Sea off Bempton!

Essentially the book delves into the ecology of seabirds rather than their physiology. However, at appropriate points, physiology is succinctly discussed. For instance, the flight mechanics of albatrosses, the importance of their stomach acidity, and the sleep functions in seabirds on the wing for weeks or months at a time.

The distances travelled by the seabirds are amazing. Example one: Dutch Arctic Terns *Sterna paradisaea* fly up to 90,000 km per year. Michael Brooke comments: "It seems only a matter of time before a study carried out on Arctic Terns nesting in north-west Russia, and having to round northern Scandinavia to reach the Atlantic, provides the world with the first 100,000 km tern journey." Example two: a male Brünnich's Guillemot *Uria lomvia* and chick swimming 3,000 km south. There are many other examples. Brooke amply discusses the strategies behind such migrations. He also highlights "the lost years" of immature birds' wanderings - lost because tracking devices are irretrievable while the immatures are not returning to a breeding colony. Presumably there are eventually going to be resilient transmitting devices that monitor those young gap years.

The book raises many interesting questions. One is Brooke's intriguing proposition (page 64): "If birds from separate colonies demonstrably remain apart outside the breeding season, the chance of genetic differentiation and, maybe, eventual speciation increases." He cites the "exquisite example" of Cook's Petrels *Pterodroma cookii*, studied by Matt Rayner. Rayner is himself an example - an example of Brooke's

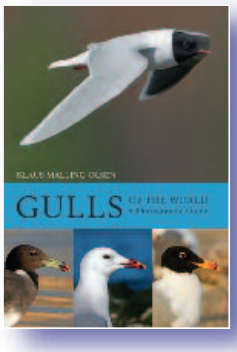
collegial asides on the character of researchers. Matt is introduced to us as "a New Zealand ornithologist with a tattoo count that is normal for a building site and above average for a scientific conference". Ornithologists are often just as interesting as the birds they study.

More characters follow. Tommy Clay (University of Cambridge), analysing Murphy's Petrels *Pterodroma ultima* on Henderson Island, is "a man who confirms that a twinkling eye and statistical expertise are by no means incompatible". Barbara Wienecke (Australian Antarctic Division) logged Emperor Penguins *Aptenodytes forsteri* diving as deep as 564 m: "No wonder her face is one characterised by raised eyebrows expressing surprise and delight at the dives of penguins, and life in general". Steve Votier (University of Exeter) and team used a "blisteringly powerful jetboat" to reach the Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus* colony on Grassholm.

The author's own character and experiences are humorously expressed in a three-page Personal Prelude involving numerous islands near and far. Thus, his book begins with a sense of person, a sense of place and a sense of seabirds. Then it ranges over all the oceans. And ends back on land on "a May evening on the grass green island of North Rona... some 70 km northwest of (Scotland's) Cape Wrath". The author is awaiting dusk and Leach's Storm Petrels *Oceanodroma leucorhoa*.

Peter Holt

Gulls of the World: A Photographic Guide By Klaus Malling Olsen. Bloomsbury Publishing, London. 2018. ISBN 978-1-408-18164-5. 368 pages, 600+ colour photographs and maps. Hardback, £34.99.



Malling Olsen has produced some excellent identification guides. His books *Terns of Europe and North America* (1995, Christopher Helm, London), *Skuas & Jaegers* (2000, Christopher Helm, London), and *Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America* (2004, Christopher Helm, London) provide some of the most insightful and easy to digest information on what are often considered to be very tricky groups of birds to identify. This latest publication provides high quality images and text describing all 61 well-described gull taxa - most (or at least quite a lot) of which are recognised as distinct species. This is very much a companion guide together with *Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America*, intended to provide a more concise treatise of the group, while also providing information on all gull taxa, making use of new and largely previously unpublished images.

The introductory pages of the guide provide some general background about gulls, their ageing and moult, plumage and bare part abnormalities, size and structure, hybridisation, notes on how to use the book and gull topography. This introduction is fine, but it is pretty limited. There is little detail on key topics such as taxonomy, which is a bit of a shame given the major changes in this regard. There is also little on another important factor such as the changing status of gulls. For instance, changes to the way in which we manage waste (including discard bans and landfill closures) will likely have significant impacts not only on gull populations, but also on those interested in watching gulls. Not mentioning these important developments seemed like a bit of a missed opportunity to me.

The remaining 330 pages contain the species accounts. These are comprised of some really lovely images that capture the key features of this complex group. As a pretty keen gull watcher, I guess I fit into the target audience and I was left feeling that there is lots to admire here. I loved browsing the images of Caspian Gull *Larus cacchinans* and then turning to compare these with Steppe Gull *Larus cacchinans barabensis*, which gave the sense that this species pair is 'doable' in the field. However good, this comparison highlighted one of the areas where I felt this

book fell a bit short. It would have been good to have some comparative images so that closely related species could be better disentangled. Indeed, for such a tricky family of birds, this lack of risk-taking or lack of innovation was a bit disappointing - even more so given that there is the fall-back of *Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America*.

Overall, I think Malling Olsen has done a good job and has cemented his reputation as one of the leading figures in gull identification. I enjoyed this book and am sure it will be thumbed more and more over the coming months. However, I think this is probably one for the purist and therefore if you are looking to buy just one book on gulls, then maybe start with *Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America*. Once you've digested that volume, then maybe reach for *Gulls of the World: A Photographic Guide*.

Stephen Votier

Landfill By Tim Dee. Illustrated by Greg Poole. Little Toller Books, Toller Fratrum, Dorset. 2018. ISBN 978-1-908-21362-4. 256 pages. Hardback, £16.00.

Landfill is the fourth book by writer and radio producer Tim Dee, and focuses on gulls. It is a far cry from 2018's other notable works on gulls, *Gulls Simplified* (Princeton University Press) and *Gulls of the World* (Bloomsbury Publishing), in that although Tim Dee is undoubtedly knowledgeable about gull identification, behaviour and ecology, much of *Landfill* is devoted to the way gulls interact with humans and how they have woven their way into our history, culture and folklore. Tim Dee also watches the watchers, with many chapters describing those who spend their amateur or professional lives observing and studying gulls. A small disclaimer here - I am one of those people!

Landfill is a fascinating and eclectic read. Tim Dee is an excellent writer, and captures many of the sites, sights and species that I am so familiar with in a way that I have always wanted to be able to when I've given talks or written about gulls myself. For example, his description of the "sickly neon-coral grime that skins the whole dump" perfectly conjures up the peculiar and unpleasant residue that is so pervasive of landfill sites. Despite having spent years immersed in the scientific literature of gulls, and working with them in the field, I learnt so much from reading *Landfill*. Tim Dee details how gulls are described in texts from the Bible ('unclean' in Leviticus) to the works of Shakespeare (I was amused to learn that *Twelfth Night*, whose heroine I was named after, has the largest number of 'gull' mentions in any play by Shakespeare, although the word in that context meant 'fool'). The book's historical references beautifully illustrate how until recently gulls were restricted to the coasts. Even Gilbert White, the pioneering English naturalist and ornithologist, struggled to identify 'some large white fowls' with 'black heads' that he spotted some 20 miles from the sea in spring 1771. Elsewhere, we have descriptions of young gulls being farmed and fattened for Elizabethan feasts, and we learn how the working poor of London identified with the gulls that moved up the Thames into the city during the harsh winters of the 1890s, and began a tradition of feeding them.

I found *Landfill* a poignant read. Tim Dee convincingly shows how humans have drawn gulls into living alongside us, and how many of the aspects of gulls' lives that we dislike actually hold a mirror up to our own wasteful and destructive behaviour. The pages also exude a certain amount of dread, from his analysis of Daphne du Maurier's *The Birds* (Penguin Books) as a paranoid Cold War text, to personal accounts of his cancelled trip to Milton tip to look for Caspian Gulls *Larus cacchinans* while the rubbish was being sifted through for the remains of airman Corrie McKeague, to the mortally injured Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* fledgling ('moribund bird child') he found dying on Flat Holm Island and the Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* that fell from its

flock and spun dead on the road as he drove to Chew Valley Lake. A feeling of sadness permeates the brutal honesty with which Tim Dee writes about struggles with his own health, that of his ailing parents and some of his reflections on parenthood. Sadness too at the way gulls are reviled, although the book's gloom is ably balanced by (black) humour.

Overall, *Landfill* was mesmerising. If I had one criticism, it would be that at times I thought it was a little too eclectic. For instance, the section on searching for nightjars in Madagascar towards the end of the book felt almost like an offshoot too far. I would highly recommend this book though, and as an added bonus, it comes with eye-catching cover artwork and illustrations by the late Greg Poole. *Landfill* is a fantastic addition to my bookshelf.

Viola Ross-Smith

Orange Omelettes & Dusky Wanderers: Studies and Travels in Seychelles Over Four Decades By Chris J. Feare. Calusa Bay Publications, Mahe, Seychelles. 2017. ISBN 978-9-993-18039-5. 326 pages and 16 pages of colour plates. Paperback, £13.99.

In this rich and detailed account of four decades spent studying seabirds in the Seychelles, Chris Feare skilfully merges an autobiographical narrative with insightful vignettes outlining various aspects of the geography, natural history and culture of the islands to create a gripping read, laden with information. During the period covered, the Seychelles has undergone a rapid transition from a largely undeveloped nation to a global tourist destination, and the author documents how the country has managed to balance socioeconomic changes with the need to conserve the unique biodiversity of these islands.

After a brief introductory chapter covering the author's early years, the first half of the narrative is devoted to work conducted in the Seychelles during a three-year postdoctoral project studying the biology of Sooty Terns *Onycophrion fuscatus* in relation to commercial egg harvesting under the supervision of the legendary seabird biologist George Dunnet at Aberdeen University in the early 1970s. The culture shock of being transported from the freezing Aberdeenshire winter to this tropical paradise in a matter of hours is palpable in Feare's vivid descriptions of his early experiences of the country, its people and natural history. At this time, Seychelles was largely undeveloped, with limited inter-island transport. The communication and the logistical challenges faced by Feare during this initial period were huge - upon arrival in the country he had yet to even make contact with the owners of Bird Island, his proposed study site!

Once these initial challenges were overcome, Feare was able to spend two seasons working on Bird Island, and his chronicles of daily life in a tropical seabird colony will certainly illicit pangs of jealousy in readers for this idyllic, Robinson Crusoe style existence. Sooty Terns are perhaps the most numerous tropical seabird with some colonies numbering over a million pairs yet, despite this abundance, they face a number of threats and a period of intense egg harvesting during the early twentieth century catalysed the collapse of some colonies. Here, the author takes a chapter to detail the extraordinary ecology of this highly pelagic species and the recommendations for sustainable egg harvesting derived from his early studies on reproductive success. Following the completion of this research, Feare was afforded the opportunity to take part in an expedition with the United States Naval Medical Research Unit to investigate the presence of seabird ticks, potential vectors for emerging infectious diseases, across the island group. This ambitious voyage involved sailing through a tropical cyclone and surveying several unexplored islands. The sense of adventure and discovery is palpable in the author's writing.

Readers expecting a largely autobiographical tome will be pleasantly surprised by a number of chapters describing the geography, biology, and social and cultural history of this incredibly diverse group of islands. Like many oceanic archipelagos, Seychelles is a centre of endemism, and the author spends a chapter cataloguing the endemic birds, their distributions and their conservation status at the time of his initial visits. Despite its image as a tropical paradise, Seychelles has not escaped the ravages wrought by man on island ecosystems across the globe, and the familiar culprits of overharvesting, invasive non-native species and habitat destruction had caused catastrophic declines in many native species by the time of the author's first visit. One particular form of habitat destruction unique to tropical seabird islands was intensive guano mining for industrial fertilisers during the early twentieth century, and the author takes a chapter to detail how this industry has irrevocably altered the habitat and vegetation structure on several islands leading to the complete disappearance of their once-thriving seabird colonies.

Following a long hiatus spent working for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the UK, Feare returned to Seychelles in 1992 to test various control techniques for the invasive Common Myna *Acrodotheres tristis*, which was negatively impacting the rare endemic Seychelles Magpie Robin *Copsychus sechellarum* on Fregate Island. This led to a chance meeting with the Director of Environment, Nirmal Jivan Shah, which resulted in the resumption of Feare's studies of Sooty Terns in Seychelles. This later work involved intensive ringing studies to investigate recruitment, metapopulation dynamics, and adult and immature survival with the aim of updating and improving the guidelines for sustainable egg harvesting. In the intervening years, Seychelles had experienced sweeping socioeconomic changes resulting from the construction of an international airport and a deep-water berth that led to an influx of global tourism. The author describes his impressions of these changes in detail, then goes on to document the results of his ringing studies and the conclusions this generated with regard to egg harvesting. Since the 1970s, Seychelles has been the focus of a number of species recovery programmes which have brought many of the endemic land birds back from the brink of extinction. One particularly stark example discussed by the author is the Seychelles Magpie Robin, which has rebounded from a nadir of 12 individuals in the 1970s to a global population of around 180 individuals spread across five islands today. Seychelles is rightly lauded as a model for species recovery, inter-island translocations and restoration ecology; however, the same pressures that threatened species in the past remain and are exacerbated by the looming spectre of global climate change. Feare uses the final chapter to issue a rallying cry for conservationists to form a united front against short-term, profit-driven thinking so that the unique biodiversity of this tropical paradise can survive and thrive into the future, whilst also outlining ambitious possibilities for future ecological restoration projects.

The narrative is fast-paced and easy to read throughout, with vivid descriptions that often transport the reader to the scenes described. Moreover, the text is laden with scientific detail providing fascinating insights into the biology of the species discussed. Whilst colour photographs of the Seychelles bird species are included, these are small and are often poor quality, and in my opinion the book would benefit from better quality images. Furthermore, I would have preferred the inclusion of scientific names in the main text rather than a glossary at the back, although the inclusion of historic and contemporary creole names did provide interest. These however are minor quibbles, and overall I was captivated by the book and its subject material; a must read for anyone wishing to learn more about the natural history, geography and culture of this diverse island nation.

Liam Langley