

The Amazing World of Flyingfish

By Steve N. G. Howell. 2014. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, NJ, USA, 08540-5237. 64 pages, 12.95 USD, Cloth.

Many years ago, when I was out on the Gulf Stream off Carolina, I glimpsed a “bird.” I spun around, but it had disappeared. Birds just do not disappear, so this was very puzzling. This repeated several times until I realised I was looking at flying fish. Puzzlement then changed to wonder.

I have been fortunate to see these fabulous creatures many times since that day. Standing on the bow of a big cruise ship I noticed the other passengers would ignore birds, but these little fish always caused a stir. There is something magical about flying fish. They appear out of “nowhere” and sparkle in the sun over the deep blue water for a few seconds, before they disappear.

Finding information on these fish has proven difficult. One book I have (*A Field Guide to North Atlantic Wildlife*, by Proctor and Lynch, Yale University Press) has one page covering five look-alike species. My *Field Guide to Atlantic Coast Fishes* (By Robins, Ray and Douglass, Houghton Mifflin) covers another seven species. Neither book adds much to my knowledge. Now Steve Howell has written this delightful book. Despite its small size, it contains plenty of useful material. The author acknowledges that the family *Exocoetidae* is poorly known, but he has assembled all the data he can find. The more you learn the more fascinating these fish become. To add to their enchanting appearance they now have the most intriguing names.

How can you not perk up for a Leopardwing, a Pacific Necromancer or a Violaceous Rainmaker?

The author admits to taking “a few thousand fuzzy images, blank water or water punctuated by only a splash.” I too have spent hours trying to get a photograph. Despite there being hundreds of fish actively flying I have way more than my fair share of fish-less ocean water. Therefore it is to Howell’s great credit (and his infinite patience) that this book is so beautifully illustrated. Not only are the fish photos technically accurate, many have an ethereal quality. There are photos of some other oceanic “flyers” – rays, dolphins, squid, seals and penguins for comparison. As well there are some nice sequence shots of boobies catching flying fish on the wing.

The *Amazing World of Flyingfish* (yes it is correctly one word) is amazing. Once I opened it I did not put it down (Perhaps my one complaint is the book is too short. But then one of the author’s points is the lack of knowledge about these animals). I now have a strong urge to be back on the bow, looking at the deep blue water, waiting for that mysterious explosion of gossamer and silver. Fish enthusiasts, travelers, naturalists and photographers will love this book, so buy it for friends and family. Most of all buy a copy for yourself.

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