

Book Reviews

Book Review Editor's Note: We are continuing to use the current currency codes. Thus Canadian dollars are CAD, U.S. dollars are USD, Euros are EUR, China Yuan Remimbi are CNY, Australian dollars are AUD and so on.

ZOOLOGY

Birds of the Aleutian Islands

By D. Gibson and G. V. Byrd. 2007. Alaska. Series in Ornithology No. 1. The Nuttall Ornithological Club & The American Ornithologist's Union, 5405 Villa View Drive, Farmington, New Mexico 87402 USA. 351 pages. \$47.50 USD.

The overly enthusiastic book jacket reads: "*Most significant book ever published on Alaskan birds*". And, "*The volume represents the first in a series of avian monographs published jointly by Nuttall Ornithological Club – the oldest natural history society in North America, and the American Ornithologists' Union – the largest ornithological society in the world*".

Well, one would wish they could do better than this book then. The main problem with this publication is less its accuracy on the birds of the fascinating Aleutians, but its message: which basically is NONE. The book just represents a classic old school of ornithology which entirely lacks a reality check. There is for instance no hint about Global Climate Change (with Alaska being one of the prime places to see this), nor a real hint about the massive impact of fisheries (the Aleutian Island chain having one of the largest fisheries in the world; thus, and as elsewhere in the world, bycatch, discard and overfishing issues must be huge), or a relevant mentioning of chronic oil pollution, contamination, ghost nets, plastic debris, invasive plants and cumulative impacts for instance. Naturalists pick such details up within an eyeblink. They know for many decades that (sea-) birds reflect the habitat. But simply leaving these environmental factors out is all but 'objective science' or meaningful ornithology. Although any of these topics are found in the scientific, public and even ornithological and taxonomic literature for over 20 years by now, the authors and their book just try to look to the other side. The magnitude of the human footprint even in remote areas such as the Aleutian Islands can already be seen by the 600 (!) Raven sightings reported during winter on Unalaska. If Ornithologists want to be taken seriously, and provide best professional advice (as hinted here in this book and approved by AOU etc.), in the year 2007 and beyond, we cannot afford to fully ignore globally applicable, well worked-out ecological ideas, and simply retreat on the notion of: 'feathers and plumages' and compiled opportunistic sightings. This just makes for a job half-done: counting the deck chairs on the Titanic. And so the book and its single chapter with four appendices suffers from this mindless type of descriptive shotgun ornithology. It's definitely not sci-

ence (e.g., no hypothesis got asked by the authors, no wider context, methods and ethics questions got raised in the classroom). It's easy to show for instance that basically ALL the density estimates in this book can be ignored for true abundances (e.g., detectability and survey effort problems are virtually not addressed to this very day in almost any pelagic bird work in the Aleutians; same is true for any relevant research design to obtain better estimates). Data presented in this book were simply uncritically pooled, museum-style, from various survey methods and protocols during more than 35 years (standard methods such as mist-netting, point counts or mark-capture-recapture are not mentioned). Consequently, the inference on 'habitat use' must be dubious (e.g., in Tables 8, 9 and 10; for details on such topics see for instance various papers in THE AUK on that very issue). Due to the above, and also as a disappointment to managers, this book fails also on its trend and population estimates; it further leaves endangered and candidate species basically untreated. In other words: the Aleutian Islands National Wildlife Refuge established in 1913, and a designated International Biosphere reserve in 1972 by the U.S. Department of State, lacks relevant and ecologically meaningful avian pelagic inventory data to this very day. This books makes it clear and these details are rather surprising and when considering that Alaska has over 20 wildlife-related statisticians (one of the highest concentrations anywhere in the U.S., and likely in the world) ready to help as needed, and that the Aleutians are a global oil spill and traffic hotspot for many decades.

The opening pages of this book give a nice overview on the discovery history of the region. But if I were an Aleutian native, I would be rather offended by this publication because the native view and culture – for over 10,000 years in existence is virtually ignored. Equally ignored is an advanced Ecosystem view, e.g., food items, energy flow, processes and habitat (the authors base this mostly on a 30 years old publication by Kessel 1979).

The Aleutian avifauna currently comprises of 299 species and subspecies, of which 272 species and 28 subspecies are discussed in this book. Some readers

might argue about *Motacilla* and the subspecies taxonomy. The phylogenetic sequence and scientific and English names follow the Check-list of North American Birds (AOU 1998), but NOT ITIS (Integrated Taxonomic Information System www.itis.org) and as widely used by the U.S. Federal Government and carrying a global mandate (museums and refuges should at least refer to this scheme). The perplexing Aleutian Cormorant (taxonomic) history is covered nicely though, and likely among the best sources on this topic anywhere.

As expected from the authors, this book is strong on the story of invasive rats and foxes, and their almost endless eradication efforts on the Aleutians. However, in this book, we never really learn about the hopelessness of such work and its underlying core reasons (re-occurring ‘rat spills’, as well as invasive species, are basically a function of a mis-managed global economy, and can re-occur at any time, setting such eradication programs back to square one and adding to the true and huge costs of globalization that not well accounted).

The Aleutian climate section of this book is outdated, carrying references from 1973 etc. What will be equally surprising to most readers though is that El Nino and Regime Shifts are not really mentioned, neither. This book gives us the impression that predominantly it tried to compile bird records from the 40s, 50s, and 60s, and that it was written in the 80s. And therefore, this publication is really strong in its narrow compilation of historical records, but basically does not read well. This is because its core consists of nothing but plain species list compilations. Much arm-waiving can be found there to explain them, and the text is full of citing exceptions and outliers (a strength of this book). Because these records were mostly collected and published opportunistically, their interpretive value is rather limited, and the authors made no attempt in helping the reader with what it all really means (in several occasions the authors comment on dubious observations). The reported Bird Banding Records I find patchy. Helpful records such as from Citizen Science (http://depts.washington.edu/coastst/find_a_beach.html), OBIS-Seamap (<http://seamap.env.duke.edu>), ORNIS (<http://www.specifysoftware.org/Informatics/informaticsornis>), Beringian Seabird Colony Catalogue (http://gcmd.nasa.gov/records/GCMD_seamap270.html), Off-shore Survey work (<http://www.absc.usgs.gov/research/NPPSD/index.htm>; just think of the Fisheries and Offshore Oil & Gas Impact, as well as the Fisheries Observer projects alone) are bluntly missing. It is unclear whether Dave Sibley’s sightings, as well as observations made by other competent observers and birders were included. In the text and appendix the authors make a nice hint to the huge underlying University of Alaska Museum Collection (8,000 specimens collected from 1827 to 2000), but its digital online version, ARCTOS (<http://arctos.database.museum/home.cfm>), does not get mentioned. Instead, authors

refer to a dead-end PDF (Checklist of Alaskan birds at www.uaf.edu/museum/bird/products/checklist.pdf). The provided overview and Gazetteer of the Aleutian Islands is already easily outcompeted by the Wikipedia reference (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Islands_of_Alaska) on Alaskan Islands, globally available free of charge. The authors make reference to field data they compiled, and which must be on file somewhere with the Museum (an apparent major data source. It would be nice though to have this precious information readily available for a global audience, e.g., online in ORNIS). This matters especially in times of massive development of the region by offshore oil and gas and nearby mining.

Unfortunately, the book also carries relatively little Russian information (with the Kommandeurs Island being a natural part of the Aleutians and actually one of the best studied islands in Russia overall, with observations starting 1930s onwards. Updated citations from Russia are also missing). *In lieu* of the overarching Beringia ecosystem, and considering that the Aleutians link for centuries international markets such as China, Japan and India with the Americas, such a lack of information must be seen as a lost opportunity. From all colonial powers, the Russians, (and some English and Spanish) were there first, after all, and kept precious naturalist notes.

For the over 150 islands of the Aleutian Chain, the species sections of the Gyrfalcon, Yellow-billed Loon, Spectacled Guillemot, or for the eider duck species, for instance, show clearly how incomplete the records of this book are. Judged from similar reports elsewhere (e.g., Bay of Fundy), I believe the few reported South Polar Skua sightings in the Aleutians are underestimates.

Imprecise wording issues occur throughout the book, and no real consistent terminology is found. For instance, what is really the biological difference between a hypothetical and an accidental occurrence, and where to draw the line and when considering that all sorts of sightings from various data protocols were simply merged? I am unclear what authors exactly mean when they refer to ‘Amurland’, or breeding, migration and wintertime, and non-breeders (Table 3 is helpful though).

I like Table 5 (timing of earliest egg laying) and the 32 photos (photo 6 made bird history showing thousands of shearwaters etc., off Akutan Island). I was not able to spot relevant typos and errors in the text. But some of the observer and institutional abbreviations I could not find explained, and I have not understood why in several instances some coordinates actually lack the latitude!

As can be expected for a treatise of a major island chain like here, readers will learn some details about island biogeography, e.g., island hopping, dispersal, parmigians (a classic topic for the Aleutians) and subspecies. But this book is not really informative on

endemic genetics, and not on the global context of the Aleutian Islands, e.g., species reservoirs.

Obviously, this book can be used to describe some very relevant aspects of ornithological, Alaskan and environmental history, but the virtual absence of key words and textbook concepts such as Conservation, Adaptive Management and Sustainability must simply be perceived as 'tragic'. It leaves a clear political profile and statement. The compiled literature cited I find informative, but sometimes rather selective (e.g., milestone publications by T. Gaston and I. Jones, D. Klein and A. Springer are missing).

Overall, I think this book does fill a gap, but not a huge one (and unfortunately not a digital one), nor one that helps managers to manage seabirds better or to conserve them for the global village. Keep in mind: Pebble Mine (one of the largest Copper Mines) is expected to affect parts of the Aleutians, and Bristol Bay is forecasted by NMFS to be a major supplier of offshore oil & gas in the U.S. Further, Arctic Shipping

will run by the Aleutians! These are all global, not only Alaskan or American topics. Including future study needs for the Aleutians would have been nice, too. So if this volume is the "*Most significant book ever published on Alaskan birds*" one should be rather scared. Instead, I find that this book represents the end of an era. It stands out as a symbol of a wrongly understood, ignorant ornithology, wildlife and environmental science for Alaska and beyond, but politically supported for decades by our all tax dollars, that ignores the real needs of the living and non-living world harming the future of the globe and its citizens. Instead, relevant progress and the provision of leadership is still immediately required for a meaningful Ornithology and Resource Management. Naturalists are urgently asked to help and improve the current situation.

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