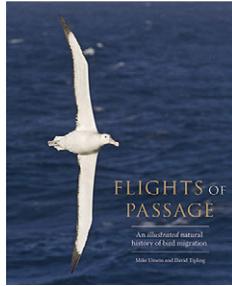


## Flights of Passage: An Illustrated Natural History of Bird Migration

By Mike Unwin and David Tipling. 2020. Yale University Press. 288 pages and 220 colour illustrations, 40.00 USD, Cloth.

As a bird bander, whenever I recapture a migrant that I banded in the same location in a previous year, I marvel at this tiny being's ability to travel vast distances and unerringly return to its previous breeding site. How do they do it? This book did not give me an in-depth explanation of why and how birds migrate, but that isn't really its intent: while Unwin and Tipling's book does provide an introduction to all aspects of avian migration, it is mainly a celebration of the wonder of flight and the drama of migration, as told through the stories and images of 67 species.



The book begins with a 12-page introduction to bird migration, of which only a few paragraphs focus on why birds migrate and how they find their way; both are fascinating topics and more detail would have been welcome. This is followed by five sections that, rather than being taxonomic groupings, are loose associations of species—wildfowl and diving birds, seabirds, shorebirds, songbirds, raptors and owls—that showcase a spectrum of migratory behaviour. A final section discusses “misfits” and other species that tell a compelling story but do not fit into the five main groupings. Each section starts with a one-page introduction to the group. Each species account then follows a similar template: thumbnail description of size, appearance, lifestyle, range and migration, and status. A map (scale depending on species) shows general breeding, non-breeding, and year-round residency areas, with arrows indicating general migration route(s) and direction. One or two pages of text highlight unique aspects of the species' life history and migration strategy.

The authors have a very Northern Hemisphere focus, with 62 of the 67 highlighted species being ones that breed there and migrate varying distances south. Of the other five species, two are Australian and three are African. There are no Western Hemisphere austral migrants, those that breed in the temperate areas of South America and migrate north to Amazonia in the non-breeding season (see review by Chesser 1994). I think this was a missed opportunity to broaden the reader's concept of bird migration by highlighting a couple of these species.

Species' status is apparently based on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, although this is not explicitly stated in the introduction, and should be

explained for those unaware of it. The status of many species was given as Least Concern, but then in the details there is mention of severe declines in certain populations: I would have liked to have seen at least a mention in the introduction of ‘shifting baseline syndrome’, the concept that people's accepted threshold for environmental degradation (or species decline, in this case) is continually lowered in the absence of historical information or past experience. I thought there could have been a little more emphasis put on conservation of important stop-over sites, the threat of hunting—particularly along the Mediterranean islands—and the threat of climate change (changes in rainfall, wind patterns, temperature changes, storms, phenology of prey, etc.). While these were all mentioned in the context of individual species, they could have been explored more in the introduction.

The maps are generally effective at locating where the species lives throughout the year, scaled depending on its range. However, I noticed a couple of errors: the legend in the map of principal migratory flyways does not match the text exactly; the map for Baltimore Oriole (*Icterus galbula*) breeding range does not extend nearly far enough west, even though Montana is mentioned in the text; and, while the text for Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) mentions birds breeding in eastern Canada, this is not shown on the map. There are also a few errors in the text: the Pink-footed Goose (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) account states that the tail is white with a black tip, but the photograph shows it is black with a white tip, as does my field guide; the Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*) account states that the species is called Whistling Swan in North America, but that is an old common name; and, in the title of the species account, Snow Goose is correctly given as *Anser caerulescens*, but the text retains the now superseded genus *Chen* for the two subspecies. As well, after stating that Lesser Snow Goose (*A. c. caerulescens*) is found westward from central northern Canada, the text incorrectly states that it is responsible for habitat degradation on breeding grounds on Hudson's Bay, caused, in fact, by Greater Snow Goose (*A. c. atlanticus*).

The poster child of long-distance migration used to be Wandering Albatross (*Diomedea exulans*), which has been known to circumnavigate the Southern Ocean three times in one year (about 120 000 km). But it may have been supplanted by Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*), which recent satellite telemetry tracking has been shown to fly from Alaska to New Zealand (11 680 km) in just nine days of nonstop flight

(p. 136)! I enjoyed reading about the many fascinating migration facts like this throughout this book.

Then there are the stunning photographs, which are really the focus of the book, many of which feature unique angles. All but 38 of the 154 photographs were taken by the award-winning wildlife photographer David Tipling. These are mostly one- or two-page action shots, but many show habitat too, especially with larger species. This is a book that can sit on your coffee table, waiting for you to pick it up and randomly choose a species to spend 5–10 min reading

about and be amazed and inspired by the diversity and beauty of migratory birds.

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### Literature Cited

**Chesser, R.T.** 1994. Migration in South America: an overview of the austral system. *Bird Conservation International* 4: 91–107. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959270900002690>

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