

## Super Suckers: The Giant Pacific Octopus and Other Cephalopods of the Pacific Coast

By James A. Cosgrove and Neil McDaniel. 2009. Harbour Publishing, P.O. Box 219, Madeira Park, British Columbia V0N 2H0. 208 pages. 26.95 CAD Paper.

As a young boy I haunted the Natural History Museum on Cromwell Road in London, England. One of the many fascinating exhibits was the shell of the Chambered Nautilus (*Nautilus pompilius*). Next to the whole shell was one cut in half, exposing the remarkable chambered interior. I always coveted this beautiful object and a specimen now graces my living room.

This book covers the nautilus and its cousins, squids and octopuses, in some detail. Most of the book, however, concentrates on the North Pacific Giant Octopus (*Enteroctopus dofleini*). This creature has a fascinating, if short [four year], life history. The authors cover its sex life, egg laying and early planktonic life.

Octopus have some amazing abilities. They can change the colour and texture of their skin in a flash. They can envelope their prey in a numbing toxin. Their suction cups ranked along their arms [octopus do not have tentacles, but squid and cuttlefish do] are immensely powerful. Octopus can squeeze their large bodies through impossibly tiny holes, making them the animal Houdini.

After introducing us to some myths [interesting ones from the native community and fanciful ones from Hollywood] the author presents an overview of molluscs. Then he focuses in on the biology of the Giant Octopus; how it lives, breathes, eats and reproduces. Because it is so different from terrestrial animals, this is an absorbing account.

One fascination with the Giant Octopus is how large does it get. Certainly ones over 70 kg are proven, but as not many people took accurate defensible measurement some big ones may have “gotten away” – at least from the record.

The authors spend some time exploring the intelligence of the Giant Octopus. The problem, of course, is how to measure brain power of a creature that is so fundamentally different from us. Numerous research-

ers have tried and, while none have come up with an absolute answer, it is clear this beast is a smart creature. It can solve problems that would confound a three or so year old human.

The other cephalopods are covered, better than I have seen elsewhere. The squid species are clarified as is their status in the North Pacific. It is obvious, however, the authors' first love is the Giant Octopus, and maybe rightly so.

The photographs, many by Neil McDaniel, are very good. Having tried underwater photography for the first time earlier this year, I have a new appreciation for undersea photographers. On land only the subject might move, but in the ocean both the photographer and the wildlife are moving all the time. Unlike land animals fish often swim too close as well. Neil and his colleagues have given us some remarkable and colourful underwater images of many curious creatures.

The book is written in a lively, anecdotal fashion that is easy to read. In fact, I wondered who the authors saw as the audience. Sometimes I felt this was a book for teenagers and at others it seemed more adult. It was repetitious, even to the point of using virtually the same text. The authors often use text boxes for important points; a great idea, but this is where much repetition occurred. There were also explanations of “scientific terms,” again a valuable addition for words like “chemotaxis.” I am not convinced that adults need a definition of “enzyme”, although teenagers might.

Overall the book is fun to read, about a species and its kin that are not well understood by most people. It is nice to realize the truth is more amazing that Hollywood's fantasies.

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## The Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State

By K.J. McGowan and K. Corwin. 2008. Cornell University Press, Sage House, 512 East State Street Ithaca, New York 14850, USA. xxiii + 688 Pages, 59.95 USD, Cloth.

We are now well into the era of second atlases of breeding birds; a few have recently come out (Ontario, Alberta) and others are currently in the field stage (British Columbia, the Maritime provinces). Atlases of today are not only known for reporting the breeding distribution of birds, they are also known for documenting avian history and basic biology as well as presenting stunning photographs or artwork of the area's birds. This second atlas of New York's birds is very representative of what we've come to expect of contemporary atlases, and it is a very welcome update on the breeding birds of that state.

One's first impression of the book is the stunning artwork. Each species account is accompanied by a pencil drawing that is much more than just a profile shot. The artwork spans all facets of birds' lives, from incubating and nest-building, to courtship displays and feeding. The most elegant of these to my eye were the combative King Rails (Alan Messer), Northern Shoveler (Sue deLearie Adair) and Great Blue Heron (John Perry Baumlin), the latter of which also ended up engraved on the book's cover. Prior to each group of birds, there is a two-page colour spread illustrating one to several of the species in a typical, though not nec-