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Book reviews

Albatross: Their World, Their Ways

By Tui de Roy, Mark Jones and Julian Fitter
2008. Published by CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne. 232 pp., 300 photographs. Hardback, $A79.95, ISBN 978-0-643095-55-7.

First, I should introduce this book as a 'must have' on the coffee table of any seabird enthusiast. Its spectacular cover photo and manageable A4 size will draw passing glances from beverage-sipping guests and, on return from your first comfort break, it will have been nosed through and gasped at. Another languishing mind will be converted to the bright side: albatross are magnificent and this book shows it.

Primarily, the book is a collection of stunning photographs. But there is more. There is a great attention to detail in this successful effort to produce 'the albatross bible'. It contains high quality colour reproduction, a *Foreword* by HRH Prince Charles, an *Introduction* by Carl Safina, personal accounts by a suite of experts, species descriptions and distribution maps, and an affiliation with the foremost agencies for albatross conservation. Coming out of New Zealand (which is 'albatross central') the book takes a world view and will capture readers world-wide.

Tui de Roy's lifetime fascination with albatross species and their worlds is poured out in Part 1, titled *Spirits of the Ocean*. This won't be read on the first, second or third passes through the book, because the photography is too distracting. On the fourth pass, the reader catches glimpses of the text and is drawn in to some adventurous and emotive accounts of visits to albatross islands. Like any good coffee table book, you don't have to read these from start to finish, which might become tedious. The chapters are self-contained and follow a logical sequence through the species from Wandering to Waved Albatross.

While wandering through de Roy's personal accounts, two themes were on my mind. Having spent time at a couple of albatross islands the script didn't necessarily appeal to me, as I have my own memories that in my mind are hard to beat. I imagine, though, that many readers will be thoroughly engaged. I was interested and had many 'I'd love to go there' moments. I could relate to de Roy's awe and empathy. In the forefront of my mind, though, was a thought from Carl Safina's introduction. . . 'Sometimes an albatross is simply a bird. When we see that, worlds open'. We humans can't help but anthropomorphise and attribute majesty, mythology and mystical skills to such a calm-looking and charismatic animal. But they are birds. They live to eat and eat to breed. They crash land because their bodies are big and some body components have evolved for long-distance flight, they don't land like that because they are 'clumsy'. They also compete for offal and baited hooks at the back of boats, not recognising the dangers of this. Which raises my second trailing theme: that so many of these birds are being dragged under-water and drowned on long-line hooks. This book will raise the profile of the albatross and introduce to many their disastrous interaction with the highly profitable fishing technique of long-lining.

Mark Jones introduces Part 2 of the book, *Science and Conservation*, with a history of albatross interactions with man, from 15th century encounters with sailing vessels to 20th century attractions to long-line vessels: from something for sailors far from home to admire and eat to something for us all to admire and strive to protect from our own activities. This is a fine read and a special component of the book. Science and conservation issues are then presented by those at their forefront. These chapters clearly outline the passion of the experts and give them a face (they include little portrait photographs), and present the issues as seen from the 'coal-face'. Of the many highlights through these chapters, I have to pull out a few. Respect has to soar for this book when giants of seabird research, like John Croxall and Henri Weimerskirch, provide their time and personal thoughts. The albatross species' mug shots in a 'line up of usual suspects' in Rosemary Gale's chapter on population statuses is compelling, with the 'Vulnerable', 'Threatened', 'Endangered' and 'Critically endangered' labels below each face. Ben Sullivan's diary extract of an early morning start on a long-liner was refreshing, and I'd have liked to have read more experiences like this. I was interested to read Marco Favero's summary of the situation in South America, an eye-opener into the human fishing effort that albatross have to contend with and managers need to regulate (I'd like to memorise the translation presented of Pablo Neruda's poem on albatross). It was appalling to read of mice attacking albatross on Gough Island in John Cooper's chapter, and I hope that gets cleaned up. And Police Inspector Conrad Glass's chapter on the plight of albatross on Tristan da Cunha is a great presentation by an enthusiast amongst other chapters by scientists.

Species profiles are then presented by Julian Fitter in Part 3 of the book. Although repeating a lot of what is available from other sources, for completeness, this is an important part of the book. Of key interest to budding albatross enthusiasts will be the distribution maps of the species and the descriptions of diagnostic features, so that what is seen can be identified. While not a book to take into the field, this section would be an asset to libraries and bridges of sea-going vessels.

To broadly summarise, this book provides a dazzling introduction to albatrosses. It doesn't expose all their secrets though. The 'how do they do it?' question posed in Carl Safina's introduction is not answered. How do they get the resources to sustain life across enormous distances of open water and navigate back to chicks on tiny islands? I don't feel this is a flaw, however. This book doesn't need to tuck into evolutionary adaptations and speciation, the mechanics of flight and foraging strategies. It is hard to criticise a book that compiles so much clever thought in its presentation, includes page after page of amazing photography and chapters from so many leading experts; so I won't. Following the readers' capture into the world of albatross, they can easily source from elsewhere information on any gaps they perceive. At just $A80, the book is terrific value. Maybe it's worth buying a few copies, one to be dog-eared on the coffee table, one for moth-balling on the shelf, one present for a friend and one for the guillotine, to display the pictures over your study wall.

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Mound-Builders

By Darryl Jones and Ann Göth

2008. Published by CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne. 128 pp., 6 tables, 12 text figures. Paperback, $A39.95, ISBN 978-0-643093-45-4.

We find the brief title of this excellent book, another slim one in the *Australian Natural History Series*, unhelpful. Even if listed under 'natural history books' it provides inadequate definition of its subject matter and thus begs the question; is it about certain termites, cichlid fishes, or some other mound-building organisms? Moreover the title does not indicate that the book is about the three megapode species occurring in Australia only and does not deal with the other 19 species of the avian Family Megapodiidae. A subtitle, as applied to two previous ornithological titles in this series, would have provided valuable additional information and marketing and bibliographic details. As we write this we see that the premier natural history book dealer in Australia agrees with us as he adds his own subtitle of 'Malleefowl, Brush turkeys and Scrubfowl' to '*Mound-builders*' in his recent catalogue, presumably in order to enhance potential sales.

The chapters constituting *Mound-builders* are: 1, *Familiar yet distinct* (5 pp.); 2, *Taxonomy, distribution and habitat* (10 pp.); 3, *Appearance and ecology* (15 pp.); 4, *The mound* (16 pp.); 5, *Abandoned eggs* (9 pp.); 6, *Growing up without parental care* (13 pp.); 7, *Social and reproductive behaviour* (11 pp.); 8, *Conservation and management of Australian mound-builders* (13 pp.); *Endnotes* (10 pp.) being the bibliography, presented chapter by chapter out of alphabetical order; and the *Index* (3 pp.). A section of eight pages shows 18 good colour photographs, two to three a page, of the Australian megapodes and their mounds. Thus the book content is rightly and appropriately weighted toward the unique nesting biology of the megapodes.

No two authors are more qualified and experienced to write about the Australian megapodes than Jones and Göth, as the bibliography to this book indicates. The quality text of this book provides a well structured, informative, delightful and easy read that comprehensively presents and discusses the remarkable and unique nesting, and other, biology of the three Australian megapode species. In doing so it also provides a broad overview of megapode biology in general. That it is really about only the Australian species is, however, emphasised by the fact that while all 22 extant megapode species are listed in a table their distributions are not detailed, not even the extensive distribution of the Orange-footed Scrubfowl beyond Australia. We were surprised to learn how relatively little is known of the biology of the latter species. Hopefully this book might stimulate some comparative studies of it.

The common names of all species of *Euliopoa* and *Megapodius* have changed from 'megapode' in Jones *et al.* (1995, see below) to 'Scrubfowl' in the present work. Interestingly, the authors point out that 30 megapode species have become extinct on the South Pacific islands over the past 1000 years, mostly owing to human activities. It was also extremely interesting to learn that mound temperature regimes during incubation directly affect the sex ratio of hatchlings, at least in the Australian Brush-turkey: more males hatching at 31°C, more females at 36°C, and equal numbers of the sexes at 34°C during incubation. Other particularly interesting facts include that an extinct New Caledonian megapode weighed 30–40 kg and constructed mounds up to 50 m in diameter and 5 m high! Another extinct species known from South Australia weighed a mere 230–330 g and lived 34–24 million years ago, much earlier than megapodes were suspected to have lived.

We cannot understand why black and white illustrations, invariably appearing on the page spread they are referred to, are allocated figure numbers while the 18 colour photographs, that form a discrete section of pages (and thus need cross-referencing), are not.

The regional map showing the distribution of all megapodes could have done with arrows indicating the many tiny islands occupied by species as its small size makes it difficult to discern which islands are actually shaded and which are not. Of three tables of megapode biometrics only the third indicates that units of measurement are millimetres and grams. While abbreviations for the Australian States used in Table 3.1 are explained the abbreviations in Table 3.2 are not. The caption for the back cover photograph (on p. *iv*) indicates that it depicts a 'Scrubfowl' (which should read Orange-footed Scrubfowl) when it actually shows a Brush-turkey. The back cover promotional blub correctly indicates that it is 'Dr' Ann Göth but not that it is also Dr (and Associate Professor) Darryl Jones. These are presumably more likely oversights by the publisher than by anyone else. We noted but a single typographical error (a superfluous 'the' near the foot of p. 13).

Most ornithological dictionaries and glossaries correctly state or imply that birds do not 'brood' eggs, as is stated they do on pages 3 and 61 of *Mound-builders*, but that they 'incubate' them; while they brood their nestlings. We find the chapter 5 title *Abandoned eggs* an odd choice because, as the text most eloquently attests, megapode eggs are anything but abandoned. It is noted that the Australian Brush-turkey (indeed all six species comprising the genera *Alectura, Aepypodius* and *Talegalla*) has a long tail the feathers of which are orientated vertically and that this 'appears to aid the species when running and manoeuvring rapidly through dense vegetation – a valuable adaptation when being pursued by a predator or dominant bird.' This may well be true but it does beg the question why, then, do other dense-vegetation-dwelling megapode species not need this adaptation. Is it also possible that if a large long tail be required for social interactions (which it is) by birds that spend most of their lives kicking heavy litter backward (as they do) then better a vertically narrowed tail structure (as in the wild ancestor and relatives of the domestic chicken *Gallus gallus*) that minimises obstruction to litter and thus damage to it than the horizontally orientated tail more typical of birds. Those megapodes kicking finer litter or with small short tails would not need their feathers vertically orientated.

The above trivial points or opinions, noted by a couple of pedants, do absolutely nothing to distract or detract from a fine and significant piece of ornithological synthesis and writing that does the book series credit. Given that *Mound-builders* is the eighth ornithological title in the series (spanning 2004–08) it is surely time that those concerned published books of a uniform high standard, as a couple of previous titles fall far short of the present one in quality (e.g. see *Emu* **105**, pp. 188–189; **108**, pp. 99–100).

The *Mound-builders* is, as its publisher states, 'an excellent introduction to one of the most unusual bird families'. Those

wishing to consult the ultimate reference work on all megapodes should see *The Megapodes* by Darryl Jones *et al.* (1995) of the Oxford University Press *Bird Families of the World* series. That said we do stress that *Mound-builders* is not a popular condensation of the much larger 1995 work, for it cites over 60 publications, the results of which are skilfully woven into the fabric of the book, not found in Jones *et al*. (1995).

We found this book as much a pleasure to read as it is interesting and stimulating, describing and discussing as it does such extraordinarily unusual avian nidification, and in recommending it to ornithologically minded people we confidently expect that they will too.

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