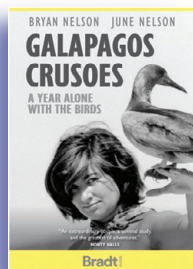


REVIEWS



Galapagos Crusoes: A Year Alone with the Birds by Bryan Nelson, June Nelson. Bradt Guides, Chesham. 2022. ISBN 978178477885. 256 pages, 8 black and white photo pages. Paperback, £11.99.

Galapagos Crusoes: A Year Alone with the Birds blends an edited version of Bryan Nelson's original 1968 book *Galapagos: Islands of Birds* with updated information and fresh observations by Bryan's wife, June Nelson. June's rewrite was commissioned to make the original scientific work more accessible to a wider audience and also to include more details of the couple's daily life. The late Bryan Nelson was a renowned ornithologist and Reader at Aberdeen University, with high-profile paper outputs and books on Sulidae and Pelecaniformes.

This book, *Galapagos Crusoes*, is an account of the time Bryan and June spent living on two uninhabited islands, Hood and Tower (known as Genovesa and Española today), within the Galapagos Islands archipelago, in the early 1960s. Prior to their journey, the couple had spent time living on and carrying out research on Bass Rock, Scotland. Although this fieldwork experience helped with their planning, it could not have prepared them for some of the hardships that they encountered whilst living in isolation in the Galapagos. The islands have no source of freshwater, so a considerable amount of the couple's time was spent on its acquisition, this being reflected in the accounts and reminiscences of solar still maintenance and water contamination prevention. Taking enough food supplies for a whole year and keeping it edible was

obviously also quite a challenge and some of their meals sounded really difficult. There are a number of stories about their food and the efforts involved in keeping it from spoilage, maintaining their paraffin fridge and dealing with pests including maggots, weevils and beetles. The hardships of maintaining their life support are well documented in this book, which includes an appendix of the food transported to the islands from the UK and its pilferage *en route*.

Despite these hardships, the couple managed to carry out a lot of scientific studies during their time on each island. *Galapagos Crusoes* contains details of their observations of the behaviour of a range of animals found on each island and could indeed act a good general introduction to Galapagos wildlife. There is some detail of bird populations and comparisons of the diversity of species between the different islands. In addition to the descriptions of the islands, other chapters also provide greater detail on the islands' various birds, mammals, and reptiles. Some of the troublesome Galapagos Giant Centipedes *Scolopendra galapagoensis* that shared Bryan and June's tent accommodation came back to the UK preserved in alcohol. The chapter on Galapagos Sea Lions *Zalophus wollebaeki* and Fur Seals *Arctocephalus galapagoensis* has interesting observations of the natural history of these mammals. Included within the island accounts are also details of many other encountered species, such as Lava lizards *Microlophus* sp., Galapagos Giant Tortoises *Chelonoidis niger* and Goats *Capra hircus*. There are some details of population changes in these species since the 1960s,

including information on the successes of the Giant Tortoise breeding programme. As expected much of the bird information within the book are the species of Bryan's research interests. There are chapters dedicated to Boobies (Blue-footed *Sula nebouxii*, Red-footed *S. sula* and Nazca *S. granti*), Waved Albatross *Phoebastria irrorata* and Frigatebirds (Great *Fregata minor* and Magnificent *F. magnificens*) featuring details that could only be gathered during long hours of field observations. Although much of the information within this book originates from fieldwork carried out 60 years ago, it is still relevant, and some parts have been updated with more recent knowledge.

The chapters in the book are either those written by Bryan and extracted from the original book, new material written by June, or their combined effort. Where appropriate, new data and clarifications have been included to bring the book up to date. Each chapter division is interspersed with line

drawings by John Busby, and these are always a joy. The book is a great account of how to survive on islands a long way from anywhere in a time before mobile phones, personal computers, and other modern technology, all of which increase the comparative ease of fieldwork today.

Towards the end of their Galapagos stay, HRH Prince Philip, aboard the Royal Yacht Britannia, visited the Galapagos Islands, enabling the Nelsons' voluminous field notebooks, full of valuable data and information, a safe passage back to the UK. Bryan and June's work, especially their bird ringing, was enhanced by the knowledge of previous researchers, and their work in-turn enabled and enhanced future researchers' work. The book is a good general introduction to the Galapagos archipelago and its wildlife and would be of interest to anyone with an interest in travel, wildlife, seabirds, or the Galapagos.

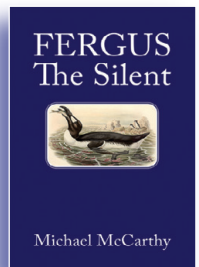
Jeff Stratford

Fergus the Silent by Michael McCarthy. YouCaxton Publications, Shrewsbury. 2021. ISBN 9781914424380, 452 pages. Softback, £12.99.

Fergus the Silent is a work of fiction, unusually so for this section of *SEABIRD* which normally reviews factual texts focused on seabird biology. *Fergus the Silent* is best described as a love story with a very strong seabird research and conservation theme. The story is told in the first person by Miles Bonnici whose dysfunctional relationship with his Nobel Prize-winning father turns him into an obsessive academic, intent on rising to become a leading evolutionary biologist. His career is progressing well, him having completed a brilliant PhD on the adaptive significance of sexual selection in Common Guillemots *Uria aalge* nesting on the fictional island of 'Skarholm', West Wales. Miles then lands a post-doctoral position at the 'Niko Tinbergen Institute', Oxford University, and publishes his first academic textbook.

Miles begins a somewhat acquisitive relationship with Jenny Pittaway, a gullus New Zealander who works for his publishing company, believing it might further his academic prospects. To win her heart, Miles takes Jenny to Skarholm, partly to indulge her love of remote islands, but also to explain his PhD there. However, the relationship is decidedly one-sided, and Miles cruelly walks out on Jenny in spectacular fashion when he quits his academic position following (what he perceives to be) a significant career setback. He justifies these actions to himself by blaming his relationship with Jenny for causing him to lose focus on his research.

Miles joins a governmental advisory body, 'United Kingdom Offshore Conservation Agency' (UKOCA), based in Aberdeen, where he hopes to complete his second book away from distractions. However, he is sent to France to support local environmentalists with cataloguing the impacts of the sinking of the 'Erika' oil tanker on the UK's seabirds. It is



there that he has an epiphany which changes his perception of seabirds from research subjects to be exploited for academic ends, to beautiful creatures that should be valued and conserved. Not only does Miles' attitude to seabird conservation change, but also his attitude towards people, and top of his list is to try and repair his relationship with Jenny. When Miles is asked by UKOCA to conduct a census of nesting seabirds on the island of 'Lanna', in an attempt to avert plans to licence oil exploration nearby, he sees an opportunity to spend quality time with Jenny, persuading her to join him on the expedition by appealing to her love of islands.

Lanna is a remote, privately-owned island off the west coast of Scotland and its breeding seabird population has never previously been censused. It is here that Miles and Jenny meet the intimidating Fergus Pryng, the island's warden and the keeper of a secret for the past 17 years. After making his remarkable discovery, Fergus dedicates his life to preserving the secret. This is made easier by the sheer inaccessibility of the island as well as a legend of a curse being placed on would-be visitors. After Miles and Jenny arrive on the island, the story takes many twists and turns as it reaches its spectacular climax.

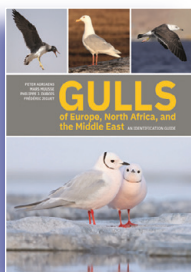
This is a well-written story, as you would expect from an experienced author such as Michael McCarthy. As the former

Environmental Editor for *The Independent* newspaper, Michael drew on his own knowledge of seabird conservation and research issues, but also sought advice from familiar names in the seabird world to help fill in some of the details. Some readers might find parts of the book far-fetched; this didn't matter to me because they helped to create a strong story. The first section of the book is long and the inclusion of a visit to a Greek island didn't contribute much to the plot.

I loved how this novel explored a number of interesting themes: the magic of islands and how their remoteness and promise of solitude draws people to them, the terrible relationship we sometimes have with the Earth, the horror of oil spills, the way we deal with implausible evidence, and the difficult, sometimes impossible choices nature conservationists have to make.

I thought *Fergus the Silent* was a cracking read and a story made more interesting by my familiarity with the seabird research and conservation themes woven into the story. My partner, not a seabirder, greatly enjoyed the book too and thought the science was well explained and accessible. So, is the oil development averted? Does Miles win back Jenny's heart? You'll have to read to the end to find out.

Andy Webb



Gulls of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East: An Identification Guide by Peter Adriaens, Mars Muusse, Philippe J. Dubois, Frédéric Jiguet. Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford. 2021. ISBN 9780691222837. 320 pages, 1,400+ colour photos, 45 colour distribution maps. Softback, £29.99.

I invite you to cast your mind back to the very beginning of your birding career. You might have known your Common Guillemots *Uria aalge* from your Razorbills *Alca torda*, but there eventually came a moment when you were staring down your

binoculars at a large, grey, juvenile gull. To your horror, you realised you had absolutely no idea which of the several possible species stood (or flew) before you. I would be willing to bet that every seasoned birder experienced that sinking feeling numerous times during their development. Even for your better-than-average birders, gulls can be notoriously tricky and given the sheer diversity within this family (Laridae), identifying a path towards skill refinement can be a daunting prospect. Luckily, there are lots of people out there who *really* like gulls, and relish the challenges associated with identifying them. One such group of

enthusiasts felt that the time was right for an updated identification manual; one which provided a concise comparison of similar species to help learners improve their skills.

The result is *Gulls of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East: An Identification Guide* – a beautiful book made for true gull-lovers. The detail is exquisite. Four or more pages are dedicated to a single species, within which there are multiple pictures, across a variety of contexts, to aid in identification. A great deal of thought has gone into the labelling, so that it is clear and relevant at the species-level. Helpfully, the book divides each species into their adult, first, second and third cycle forms. This should really help beginners to get a handle on distinguishing between those large, grey juveniles which have previously caused so much trouble. The book fulfils its primary aim of making similar gulls easier to tease apart by including a dedicated box of 'similar taxa' for each species. These boxes provide a series of key differentiating features to avoid confusion between superficial look-alikes. The authors really have thought of everything, as the 'similar taxa' box also prepares you for less common scenarios, such as when a leucistic Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* might be mistaken for an Ivory Gull *Pagophila eburnea*. This handy tool is sure to save time which might otherwise have been spent combing the images of less specialised guides, searching for self-generated tell-tale signs. Each species also has boxes outlining structure and range, making it easier for readers to extract key information.

Vagrancy in Birds by Alexander Lees, James Gilroy. Helm, London. 2021. ISBN 9781472964786. 400 pages, 360 colour photos and illustrations. Hardback, £39.99.

Avian vagrancy is a phenomenon that has fascinated natural historians for centuries. From Victorian collectors willing to spend fortunes on a rare specimen, to today's high-octane bird-chasing 'twitchers', the enigma of vagrancy has become a source of obsession for countless birders

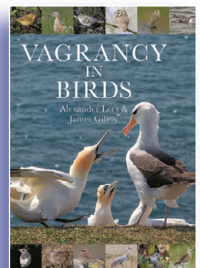
The book's scope concerns the 'wider Western Palearctic' and it boasts a sizable species list in its contents. It also features several reported hybrids, some of which (according to the authors) have never previously been described in print. These include the superbly named 'Viking Gull' *Larus argentatus* x *L. hyperboreus*, whose account receives the same level of detail and care as those belonging to their much better-known family members. As a side effect, the book might be a little chunky to carry around all day in the field, but it could perhaps be thrown (or placed gently and with great reverence) in a suitcase to bring out during 'gull-identifying-hour', which I assume everyone has at the end of their day. In a similar vein, the introduction might appear a little intimidating due to its length and technicality, however it is well worth a read to ensure you are getting the most out of the book.

Although the goal of this book is clearly to educate birdwatchers about gulls, I believe that anyone with an interest in the fine details of bird identification has a lot to gain from studying *Gulls of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East: An Identification Guide*. Aside from the widely applicable tips and advice one would absorb by following its methods, it is difficult not to be touched by its infectious passion for its subjects. It will make gull-enthusiasts of us all!

Fionnuala McCully

worldwide. The 'twitching' scene in Britain, especially, is well established, with reports of large numbers gathering at the site of a rare bird often featuring within the mainstream press. However, this practice is not confined to Britain and vagrancy in birds occurs across the globe.

Vagrancy in Birds, explores the how and why of bird vagrancy on a global scale. It details both how birds navigate, as well as the driving forces that can cause birds to be



found thousands of kilometres from their intended location, and even on different continents from the one they set out for.

My personal favourite chapter, 'Vagrancy Through Compass Errors', works through the various vagrancy hypotheses and makes for fascinating reading. I really enjoyed reading through the ideas on how reverse migration, mirror-image misorientation, compass errors, and the axis of migration might work on a migrant bird and how each of these might explain how 'lost' birds end up where they do. Indeed, the first 71 pages of the book takes us through all the possible causes of vagrancy in birds, from compass errors, wind drift and overshooting to extreme weather, irruptions and human-driven vagrancy. This introduction sets the scene for the bulk of the book, where the authors look at vagrancy family-by-family, exploring why some are more prone to vagrancy than others.

Some of the most mysterious vagrants, in that we know so little about their movements, can be found amongst the seabirds. Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophris*, White-chinned Petrel *Procellaria aequinoctialis*, Ascension Frigatebird *Fregata aquila*, Zino's Petrel *Pterodroma madeira*, and both Northern *Macronectes halli* and Southern Giant Petrels *M. giganteus* all have their origins in far-flung islands, many of them in the southern hemisphere. Sightings of these species outside their normal ranges are incredibly rare, but are increasing in number, so be sure that there will be more vagrant individuals for keen-eyed seawatchers and seabird enthusiasts to find. There is also a theory that the opening of the Northwest

Passage between Greenland and North America for longer periods each winter has enabled a few Pacific Ocean seabirds to make it into the North Atlantic; Long-billed Murrelets *Brachyramphus perdix*, Ancient Murrelets *Synthliboramphus antiquus*, and Tufted Puffin *Fratercula cirrhata* may well be joined by others on the national lists of many European countries as these northern waters become increasingly accessible to them in the future.

Vagrancy in Birds has over 300 mouth-watering photographs of rare birds from across the globe illustrating the various sections of the book. These images are stunning and made me go back to the book again and again just to look through them. Indeed, the cover itself might stop many *SEABIRD* readers in their tracks, showing a Black-browed Albatross being seen off by a couple of disgruntled Northern Gannets *Morus bassanus* at Heligoland, Germany. However, it is worth moving beyond the images, as this is a book that should be read from cover to cover; to not do so would be to miss out on an awful lot. That said, the way the book is put together does mean that it can be dipped into. I found myself skipping to particular families of birds to see which species were most likely to be prone to vagrancy, and when and where they might turn up. Being able to look at bird families from across the globe and the chances of vagrancy affecting individual birds within them is one of the most interesting things I have read on birds for a long time. This is a book I will definitely add to my bookshelf.

Paul Stancliffe