

Book Reviews

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Antarctic wildlife: a visitor's guide to the wildlife of the Antarctic Peninsula, Drake Passage and Beagle Channel

James Lowen
WildGuides, Old Basing, UK, 2011
ISBN 978-1-903657-32-4, 240 pages. £15.95

Ecotourism in Antarctica has grown enormously in the past two decades and the vast majority of visitors arrive from South America across the Drake Passage to explore the Antarctic Peninsula and the South Shetland Islands. Viewing wildlife is high on the list of things to do for many visitors, and identifying sightings depends on reference to a field guide.

There are a number of options for field guides for Antarctic wildlife on the market already, but these often cover species from other high latitude islands that a visitor to the Antarctic Peninsula has no chance of seeing: a needless distraction to most tourists. Most guides also fail to strike the right balance between illustrations, text and size for the average tourist: some provide long and detailed accounts of biology and behaviour that in some cases make them too bulky to take into the field, while others comprise a catalogue of pictures with a perfunctory bullet list of identification features. There was a gap in the market for a portable, field guide that provided images and text to allow tourists to identify only those species that will be encountered during a typical Antarctic Peninsula tour: this gap has been filled admirably by James Lowen's new book.

James Lowen has worked as an Antarctic tour guide for a number of years, and has clearly gained a good understanding of what his target audience wants. It contains just the right amount of information for most tourists and is written in a friendly and engaging manner that will appeal to the general tourist market. It is also small enough to be portable and looks like it would tolerate modest amounts of drizzle or spray such that it can accompany the tourist anywhere on their journey.

The book includes useful background information on the habitats and regions that will be visited and a commentary on tourism and wildlife conservation in the Antarctic. It also provides useful practical tips on how to find and photograph wildlife and advice on what to bring. The main section of the book provides descriptions of the seabirds and marine mammals that a tourist might expect to see. These are grouped according to the geographic section of the journey in which they are most likely to be encountered, making reference simple for those not acquainted with taxonomic order. There are multiple colour photographs for each species, showing animals in the full variety of poses and life stages required to allow identification. The standard of

the photographs is high and these are often stitched together onto a common background to attractive effect. The text is largely devoted to highlighting each species' salient identification features. The species accounts also include tips on "where to look" and a "talking point": an interesting factoid about the species with which to regale your companions over dinner. There are also a series of photographs depicting penguin behaviour which will help visitors to interpret what is going on at the many rookeries they will visit and a short section on Antarctic plants for those readers with an interest in botany.

Purchasing the book also supports BirdLife International's Save the Albatross Campaign, which is dedicated to conserving albatrosses by reducing bycatch mortality inflicted by longline fisheries. So while visiting the world's coldest continent the eco-conscious tourist who bought this book will have a warm feeling inside.

On the negative side, the identification text for the great albatrosses is badly structured: key identification features for a given species often appear in the account for another species to provide comparison, which adds confusion to an already bewildering identification problem. Those birders hoping to attempt identification of Wandering from Antipodean, Gibson's or Tristan albatrosses will need to look at another guide as these only receive a cursory mention. The inclusion of raptors in the Beagle Channel section is somewhat incongruous given all other species described are water or seabirds and raptors are typically hard to identify given distant flying views and variable plumage characteristics with age. The photography tips don't include vital advice on equipment care, particularly the risk of condensation damage when bringing a freezing cold camera unprotected into a warm, humid cabin. But these are minor criticisms really: overall this is an attractive and informative little book that is perfect for all but the most avid wildlife-watchers that visit the Antarctic Peninsula.

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Climate change in the Polar Regions

John Turner & Gareth J. Marshall
Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011
ISBN 978-0-521-85010-0. 448 pages. £70

Climate change in the Polar Regions has received increased attention over the last several years. Reports of rapid changes in sea ice and temperature have been common in the media, with the disintegration of Antarctic ice shelves and the record minimum sea ice extent in the Arctic in 2007