

## VAGRANCY IN BIRDS

LEES, A., & GILROY, J. 2022. Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford. 400 pp., many color photographs, 12 color graphics and maps. Hardcover: ISBN 978-0-691-22488-6, US \$35.00

*Vagrancy in Birds* starts with a statement of the scope of the work, which includes tackling the difficulties in defining vagrancy, and then proposing a definition. The next section explores how birds navigate and how navigation fails, causing vagrancy. I'm not an expert on bird navigation or vagrancy, so I cannot evaluate the accuracy or completeness of this section, but the authors explore endogenous (compass error) and exogenous (generally weather) mechanisms of navigational failure. The section ends with a discussion of the results and the possible adaptive significance of vagrancy. We learn that some vagrancy may be exploratory rather than the result of error, and may play an important role in the adaptations of species to climate change.

The authors devote the bulk of the book to accounts of vagrancy in bird families, ranging from nine words for Rhynochetidae (Kagu) ("Kagus *Rhynochetos jubatus* are flightless and generally very sedentary.") and Melanopareiidae (Crescentchests) to 11 pages for Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers). Each family account contains examples of vagrancy in various species and attempts to find causes in some cases, as well as overall patterns. Photographs of individual vagrants accompany many of the examples. Finding and getting permission to use all those photos must have been a Herculean task, but the authors both being members of the British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee must have helped.

A final five-page section discusses vagrancy in an era of global change, with predictions for the future of avian vagrancy and a mention of the need to reduce the carbon footprint of 'twitching' (chasing bird sightings—especially vagrancy—by birdwatchers). The references at the end take up 39 pages, with a 25-page species index where birds can be looked up by family, scientific name, or common name.

The intended audience was not clear to me through much of the book. At first, I assumed the intended audience was bird researchers, given the extensive reference list. However, phrases such as "perhaps the candidate for the best 'yard-bird' of all time" and frequent references to 'twitching' convinced me that the intended audience included the more general birdwatching community. I think the book is probably useful for researchers, however, and is well-referenced for those wanting more information or details of studies and observations.

The book is not specific to seabirds, and covers all bird families. However, seabirds are well represented in the book, as many species have extensive records of vagrancy. Seabird biologists and managers may be interested in the general mechanisms of navigation in birds and the particular interactions of seabirds with wind and storms. Many seabird species can potentially colonize new breeding sites through vagrancy, and the authors include records of extralimital breeding and hybridizing by various species. Oceanic islands are migrant traps for all manner of birds—not just seabirds—and managers on islands may be interested in other species that appear unexpectedly. Another topic of potential interest to seabird biologists is how seabird species' distributions and migration patterns, as well as regional weather patterns, affect the species' potential for vagrancy.

I have a few minor criticisms. Defining vagrancy involves identifying the normal range and migration routes of a species, which the authors admit is sometimes a difficult task, especially when geographic ranges are changing. They propose defining the geographic range of a species as encompassing "something like 99.99 per cent of individuals of a species at a given time." However, this seems to be just transferring the problem onto another difficulty, figuring out what and where 99.99% of individuals are. Furthermore, the authors mostly attribute failures in navigation to juveniles or first-time migrators, but do not address the question of whether most vagrants are indeed first-time navigators. I think there are data on age—at least hatch year or after hatch year, or plumage—for many vagrants. Finally, some of the photographs are not discussed in the text, and the captions only state the species, location, date, and whether it was the 1st, 2nd, or nth record of the species for the region. I would like to see something about the normal range of the species as well.

The book is packed with details and is lavishly illustrated with photographs and some explanatory graphics. One certainly does not need to read all the family accounts. The book perhaps contains too much information if one is only interested in one or a few species. The goal seems to be to explain patterns of vagrancy in all birds, however, and I think the book generally accomplishes this as much as is possible.

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## AUDUBON AT SEA: THE COASTAL AND TRANSATLANTIC ADVENTURES OF JOHN JAMES AUDUBON / WITH A FORWARD BY SUBHANKAR BANERJEE

IRMSCHER, C. & KING, R.J. 2022. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London. 334 pp. Hardcover: ISBN 978-0-226-75667-7, US\$30.00.

From a purely scientific perspective, *Audubon at Sea* is a marvel. It details the coastal and sea-faring life of John James Audubon, the controversial figure behind many of the most important advances in ornithology of the last 200 years. Starting with a brief history of his parentage and birth, the book then uses Audubon's own journals and works to craft a story of his experiences. Meticulously translated from Audubon's own slapdash and often disorganized shorthand, the reader is taken directly into the Audubon's mind as he transforms from casual birder, to scientist, to literary expert. The juxtaposition of the first third of the book to the second third was incredible, with Audubon moving from an incredibly puzzling array of notes straight into flowing works of almost musical prose.

Incorporated throughout the book are beautiful plates from *The Birds of America*, giving the reader an important visual reference for the species Audubon encountered throughout his voyages. Also included are dozens of paintings from the time, which help the reader internalize the history of the period with Audubon's actions and movements.

This book is not for the casual reader, but for the dedicated birder, historian or ornithologist. It would best be appreciated by someone who already knows a fair amount about who John James Audubon is and wants to learn more about a specific period of his life, directly through his own flawed lens. The difficulty of the shorthand found in the first third of the book, and the technical history found throughout, make it a challenging but rewarding read. I cannot stress enough how incredible it was to read through such a collection of firsthand accounts. Audubon had a talent for speaking directly to the reader, acting like a personal tour guide to some of the world's most fascinating species of birds.

For those with a strong interest in seabirds, this book incorporates a wonderful mix of history and intricate details of dozens of iconic species, such as the Little Guillemot and Sooty Tern. It also manages to have a strong conservation message, with Audubon himself often remarking and reveling in the natural world while lamenting on its inevitable loss and decline.

From a conservation perspective, it also paints a picture of Audubon as a hypocritical conservationist. He regularly hunted, skinned, and ate thousands of birds over the course of his journeys. Many of his entries remark on the delectability of one species, or the paleness of the yolk of another. He internally debates how easily some eggs crack or the ease with which some birds can be caught and cooked. Audubon relishes these hunts and finds an almost disturbing amount of joy in the capture of his chosen subject. I appreciate that the authors chose to highlight this hypocrisy and discuss it in length in their introductions. To the conservationist, one of the most satisfying parts of the book is actually in reading about his repeated failures in capturing the American Flamingo, which continuously outsmarted him and frustrated him to no end.

If the goal of *Audubon at Sea* was purely to discuss the science and transformation of John James Audubon from seasick child to world-renown ornithologist, it would have been a smashing success.

However, it is unfair and a disservice to millions of ornithologists of color to discuss Audubon independently of his extremely troubled history, and that is where this book fails. As a second-generation Caribbean immigrant and someone who has also spent years living in Nantes, France, the aversion with which the authors seemed to want to directly address Audubon's racism and avid enthusiasm for slavery was disappointing, and in a few cases, appalling.

When discussing the history of his father, Capitaine Jean Audubon, Irmischer and King go into a surprising and hopeful amount of detail. In their introduction, they detail Capitaine Audubon's introduction and avid participation in the buying and selling of slaves, his life in Nantes and its history as one of the most prolific slave markets in the world, as well as his multiple mixed-race children. However, when discussing slavery in the context of his son, John James Audubon, the hope for a frank and truthful discussion of race in the Audubon legacy evaporates. Irmischer and King repeatedly change to discussing the use of slaves in passive voice. For example, it was not that "John James Audubon used slaves to do his work", it was that "enslaved people did the work for him." It reads as if Audubon were somewhat reluctant to use slaves and only did so out of necessity, instead of the reality that Audubon was an enthusiastic slaver and actively partook in buying, selling, and gifting people as objects. The use of passive voice means the reader has trouble internalizing the actions of the subject, which in this case means that Audubon is unjustly afforded a degree of emotional separation from the topics and activities with which The Audubon Society is currently struggling to address.

From the perspective of racial injustice, the Coda section has a number of troubling phrases and sentences, which seem either to downplay Audubon's white nationalism and racism—immediately comparing it to the disappointment of his not becoming a sailor—or seemingly make him out to be some sort of progressive ally for his time, and one who was troubled on the topic of race. On pages 309–310, for example, we read this stunningly tone-deaf paragraph:

*"Approving accounts of how Audubon would neglect his business to scour the woods around Henderson for more birds to draw, gloss over the fact that he could only do so because enslaved humans did his work for him. Yet Audubon genuinely admired Black people for being good cooks and excellent shots (as he thought he was too), although such affirmations of their worth, troubled anyway by Audubon's penchant for stereotypical labels ... evaporate when we remember where he made such remarks."*

The subtle praise here awarded to Audubon for 'genuinely admiring Black people for being good cooks and excellent shots' is bizarre. First, you cannot ascribe a talent to a particular race. Second, in a slave society, if someone is not good at something they are beaten, raped, and/or killed. The authors' use of 'Black people' as a collective in combination with a perceived compliment jarring; for them to further gloss over that the people Audubon saw had to become good at these activities just to survive was even more disheartening.

All of this points to a bigger problem with the John James Audubon legacy: that those who have spent their lives studying and revering

him, particularly those who are not people of color, can have a lot of trouble internalizing and consolidating his actual flawed and alarming personal history with the idealized version they grew up with. If we want to address this legacy and move forward as a community, books like *Audubon at Sea* need to keep the tone they

reserved for Audubon's father when describing the actions of the man himself.

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## NEW(ISH) AND NOTEWORTHY

### *Neptune's Laboratory: Fantasy, Fear, and Science at Sea*

ADLER, A. 2019. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. 256 pp. Hardcover ISBN: 978-0674972018 US\$42.

One hesitates to admit this out loud, but the world's oceans can sometimes seem to serve as little more than the stage on which (or in which) the actions of our main players—the seabirds—take place. But the sea is obviously a rich study space in its own right, and in *Neptune's Laboratory*, Antony Adler takes the reader on a lively tour through the history of oceanography. Starting in the 19th Century, Adler, a historian at Carleton College, looks at the ocean not only scientifically, but also politically, as a contested space in service of multiple competing agendas. This incorporation of the human element into what might at first glance appear to be one of the most physical of sciences leads him to some surprising insights. "If we accept the premise, which historians of science have long asserted, that scientific work, like all human activity, is shaped by human emotion and imagination" Adler writes, "we will be alert to the importance of dreams, fantasies, and fears in its development and outcomes."

### *Birds and Us: A 12,000-Year History from Cave Art to Conservation*

BIRKHEAD, T. 2022. Princeton University Press. Princeton, New Jersey, USA. 496 pp. Hardcover ISBN: 978-0691239927 US\$35.

In his earlier books, ornithologist and writer Tim Birkhead has tended to focus either on components of birds' lives (how they perceive the world, their egg-laying prowess), or, from the human perspective, a narrower set of more strictly scientific encounters. In *Birds and Us*, he broadens his view significantly, looking at birds' and humans' complex cultural intertwinings as they have played out over several millennia. Turned over and over in Birkhead's careful hands, birds become objects of worship, consumption, art, study, recreation, conservation. The underlying theme in all of this, though, is one of fascination. The book is richly illustrated with black-and-white images throughout, and includes a sheaf of color plates showing bird art through the (mostly European) ages.

### *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*

LATOURE, B. 2018. Translated from French by Catherine Porter. Polity Press. Medford, Massachusetts, USA. 128 pp. Paperback ISBN 978-1509530571 US\$15.

Although this book leans heavily on the (*ish*) of *new(ish)*, I happened to read it recently and found it absolutely fascinating. As a philosopher, Latour has spent decades thinking about the culture and sociology of science. Here, he turns his gimlet if impish philosophical eye to environmental degradation, climate change, and what can be done about it. In short sections, Latour builds his critique of certain entrenched dualisms—Left/Right, Global/Local—before reconfiguring their positions in provocative and insightful schema. For this reader's eye, those schema could be as amusing as they were enlightening; more than once I thought, *It would be interesting to see if any data support these suppositions*. But such a narrow-minded reservation is beside the point. These are desperate times, and they require thought unbounded. "For there to be a world order," Latour writes near the end, "there first needs to be a world made shareable by this attempt to take stock."

### *Seabirds of Southern Africa, Second Edition*

RYAN, P. 2023. Penguin Random House South Africa. Cape Town, South Africa. 192 pp. Paperback ISBN: 978-1775848479 US\$17.

In 2017, Peter Ryan of the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology at the University of Cape Town, published the first edition of this book. At the time, *Guide to Seabirds of Southern Africa* was the first to focus exclusively on the birds of those waters. For the second edition, Ryan has shortened the title a little, but expanded his guide in other, more substantial ways. In addition to the robust introduction of old, Ryan includes new chapters on prey, as well as updated information on taxonomy and distribution. The pictures are marvelous, too, showing not just all sorts of species in different plumages and ages, but also the dramatic environments they call home.

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