

BIRDS OF ST HELENA TAKE FLIGHT IN NEW BOOK

by Trevor W. Hearl

One of the successes of the nature conservation programs currently being pursued so diligently on St Helena and Ascension islands has been to stimulate a greater appreciation of island bird life and lore. The publication of a simple handbook, identifying the birds of these islands, is therefore a welcome and timely complement to these important projects, answering the needs of visitors and, it is to be hoped, of local schools.

As the author points out, “the islands themselves are fascinating places to watch birds,” with their “unbelievable variety of landscapes” within the compass of a few square miles, offering the bonus that, given a guide to the best vantage points, all the main avian habitats can be viewed in a single day for each island.

Ascension Island has long been recognized as a major breeding site for the birds of the South Atlantic, providing the British Ornithologists’ Union (BOU) in 1957 with a significant “ornithologically unexplored spot” for its celebratory centenary expedition, as recalled by Bernard Stonehouse in *Wideawake Island* (1960).

St Helena, on the other hand, had no such reputation; even its most sympathetic naturalists, J.C. Melliss (1875) and Philip Gosse (1938), regarded its birds -- except the “Wirebird” -- as being “of little interest” Indeed, the Duke of Edinburgh could not “remember seeing any birds there” when compiling his photographic study of *Birds from Britannia* in 1962. Since the island’s recognition as a “natural treasury” in the 1980s, however, its birds have attracted increasing interest and some concern, heightened today by the threat of an airport. Years of painstaking research, and such radical conservation campaigns as the feral cat eradication project on Ascension Island, have further focused attention on island birdlife, promoting the publication of posters, newsletters and books, including the BOU definitive checklist, *The Birds of St Helena*, compiled by Beau Rowlands in 1998, followed in 2000 by the Ashmoles’ natural history of both islands, with summary accounts of all the birds and excellent colour photographs.

The dedication of these and other authors and researchers to the study and welfare of the flora and fauna of these islands deserves to be more widely known; I note, for example, that Philip Ashmole, who is currently studying the invertebrates of Prosperous Bay Plain on St Helena, was a member of the BOU team on Ascension in 1957.

Neil McCulloch has distilled all this expertise, in the light of his own long island experience, to provide tourists and teachers with a user-friendly identification guide to the 28 species of birds they are likely to encounter on the two islands, divided equally between seabirds and land birds. The result is not only a practical, but a most attractive handbook with a concise, judiciously informative, jargon-free text, richly illustrated throughout by Dan Powell’s graphic, true-to-life colour sketches, emphasizing the main identifying features of each species in form and flight.

A succinct, introductory overview explains each island's natural environment, set in an historical context, while Appendices report cases of "the exceptional and unexpected," including extinct birds, accidental visitors and failed introductions, 15 of the latter (it might have been pertinent to reflect) having been made in 1929 by a zealous St Helena Agricultural Officer in pursuit of pest control. Notes on further reading and sources of information are given for readers tempted to discover more about the fascinating natural history of these inimitable islands.

The value of this little book is further enhanced by the quality of its design and production, making it as much a pleasure to behold as it is to read at leisure and study in the field. Published in the United Kingdom by The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, in conjunction with the St Helena Nature Conservation Group, the St Helena National Trust, and the Ascension Island Government, this is a popular guide that can be recommended without reservation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

McCulloch, N. *A Guide to the Birds of St Helena and Ascension Island*. Sandy, United Kingdom: The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, 2004. (ISBN: 1 901930 46 7, retail price in softcover, £10).

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