

NEW ZEALAND SEABIRDS: A NATURAL HISTORY

WILSON, K.-J. 2021. Nelson, New Zealand: Potton & Burton. 140 pp., colour photos and illustrations throughout. Hardcover: ISBN 978-1-9885-5025-1, NZ\$49.99.

The cover of *New Zealand Seabirds: A Natural History*, by Kerry-Jayne Wilson, features an image of Buller's Albatross. I guess it is appropriate, but I would have much preferred one of Wilson's Storm Petrel. It's true that the naming of Wilson's Storm Petrel has nothing to do with Kerry-Jayne and that it breeds in the Antarctic, perhaps putting it seemingly outside the purview of a book about New Zealand seabirds. However, given that New Zealand claims the Ross Dependency in Antarctica, and given that the Wilson's Storm Petrel's seasonal migrations can take them through New Zealand's waters, I don't think it would have been too much of a stretch to showcase the diminutive seabirds named in Kerry-Jayne's likeness. As Kerry-Jayne says in the book, "These little birds can appear so fragile, yet I have watched Wilson's Storm Petrels pitter-patter along the water surface, pecking at plankton during an Antarctic storm in 10-metre breaking waves."

The Ross Dependency is where I first met Kerry-Jayne in 1977, at an isolated field hut on Ross Island. I had gone there to study Adélie Penguins. Kerry-Jayne arrived on a helicopter a few weeks later, carrying a spotting scope and a bottle of Canadian Club whiskey. It was hard not to admire her priorities.

While I was out in the penguin colony conducting my research, Kerry-Jayne would set up her scope on a table in front of our green-painted wooden box of a hut. For the entire day, she would scan the horizon every few minutes recording any animals she saw. Without her dedication and keen eye, I doubt that I would have seen my first Sei Whale, my first Southern Giant Petrel, and certainly not my first Wilson's Storm Petrel. A Wilson's Storm Petrel is a tiny, fragile sliver of a bird that often flits just above the surface of the sea. Even through the spotting scope, it looked like no more than a dot to me. But Kerry-Jayne had come to Antarctica after two years of censusing birds and whales in the Gulf of St. Lawrence for Memorial University of Newfoundland, where she had memorized the distinguishing characteristics of virtually all seabirds. And not just their size, shape and colouration, but also their flight patterns and behaviours. "It's a Wilson's Storm Petrel alright," she told me. Despite the bird being kilometres away and no bigger than a robin, she had made out the white patch on its rump as it fluttered across the sea's surface in the gaps between the ice floes. Honestly, I wouldn't have been surprised if she had also told me what sex it was and what it had eaten for breakfast.

That night we opened the whiskey and Kerry-Jayne told me another thing she had learnt in Newfoundland: "you never put a cap on a bottle." Together with Paul, the other person staying in the hut, we duly drank the entire contents of the bottle. Before climbing into our bunks, Kerry-Jayne drank seven glasses of water. This caused some consternation for the rest of us, as, at that stage in the season, we got our drinking water by fetching snow from a distant snowbank and then melting it. Seven glasses represented a lot of snow to fetch. Yet Kerry-Jayne gulped down the water, insisting it would rehydrate her brain and prevent a hangover. As it was, Paul and I were up at 7am, while Kerry-Jayne lay prone in her bunk groaning until well after mid-day. If she were capable of making sounds that resembled a language, I'm sure she would have said something pithy – that was her forte – but on this one occasion, speech eluded her.

It did not on another occasion, which occurred a few days later. Our alcohol stocks much-depleted, Kerry-Jayne had shared some green leafy material with us. Suddenly ravenous, she went to our storeroom and broke open a wooden box of sledging biscuits left behind by an earlier expedition. The box had stencilled on it: *John Darby 1965–66*. Biting into one of the 12-year-old biscuits, Kerry-Jayne announced in her laconic drawl, "Poor John Darby, they gave the bastard stale biscuits." I'm still laughing.

Over the next 45 years that I knew Kerry-Jayne as a friend, she would prove to me time and again that those initial impressions were wholly accurate. She had the driest sense of humour of anyone I've ever known. She was generous and loyal, always happy to share with you what was hers, be it whiskey or whatever. And she would do anything – even crazy things – despite any risks of being killed, maimed, hurt or just needing a bucketload of Paracetamol, as long as it involved getting her close to her first love: seabirds.

Kerry-Jayne managed to survive all that life threw at her – and, arguably, all that she threw at it – for 73 years, until eventually she succumbed to cancer earlier this year. This was the worst kind of cancer, the aggressive kind, the kind that when you first learn about it your doctor gives you weeks, months at best. I don't think Kerry-Jayne ever thought that she would die, even when stuck up a sheer cliff-face for days while on an isolated island by herself, even when falling into the Ross Sea where nothing but a very small piece of ice kept her body half afloat until we could pull her out, even when having a Fiordland Penguin slice through the septum of her nose so that she nearly bled to death. However, when it came to the cancer, she wasn't so much determined to beat it – she knew that was impossible – as she was determined to delay it. She had one final project she wanted to complete: her book on New Zealand seabirds.

New Zealand Seabirds: A Natural History is much more than just a compendium of information about New Zealand's seabirds – it is more like a love letter to seabirds. Sure, it has the usual encyclopaedic type of information about the different types of seabirds, their scientific names, where they are found and their conservation status. Most of the book, however, is devoted to extolling their virtues: their breeding and how they manage the balance between foraging at sea and breeding on land, their relationship with the marine environment, their amazing migrations, and the threats many of them face. Throughout the book, which is richly illustrated with coloured photographs and diagrams, Kerry-Jayne uses the stories of individual species to highlight the general points she is making. Among other examples, we learn about the foraging segregation of Gibson's and Antipodean Albatrosses, the migratory patterns of Sooty Shearwaters, the threats to terns and gulls using braided rivers in New Zealand's South Island, and brood reduction in penguins. There are so many seabirds that call New Zealand home that it would be impossible in a book of 136 pages to go into them all in great detail, but by cleverly telling us such stories about the likes of Chatham Petrels, Little Penguins and even that poser, the Buller's Albatross, we get to know the birds in far greater depth than we should have a right to expect from a book of its length.

In a sense though, this deserves to be as much a coffee table book as it does a reference book. The generous size of the pages, the high-quality paper they are printed on, and the lavish use of illustrations make for a book that is as beautiful as it is informative. Reading the book from cover to cover, Kerry-Jayne takes us on a journey from what are seabirds, to where they are found, to what they do, to how they are faring. The book, however, works equally well in its coffee table guise: the bite-sized stories and a layout festooned with coloured break-out boxes makes for the sort of book we can pick up and dive into anywhere, like gleeful gannets, confident of being treated to some satisfying morsels.

Kerry-Jayne's writing style is direct, authoritative, and dripping with information, as befits someone who was recognized for her excellence in teaching during 23 years as a lecturer at Lincoln University. The opening lines to her last chapter epitomise the way she does not mince her words: "Seabirds are in trouble – not just in New Zealand but worldwide. Seabirds are more at risk than any comparable group of birds."

Kerry-Jayne was not just an admirer of seabirds, but also their champion – so much so that in 2019, she was recognized for her services to seabird conservation, being made a member of the New Zealand Order of Merit. Perhaps that is why I like the comparison

with Wilson's Storm Petrels so much. Small in stature, she was nevertheless tough beyond belief. In her life, she was in many ways a pioneer, although her modesty was such that she regarded as small steps what, for the rest of us, were really giant leaps. New Zealand's seabirds can be thankful for having such a person in their corner.

My life beyond penguins involves teaching science communication. Sometimes I have gotten New Zealand's pre-eminent landscape painter, Grahame Sydney, to talk to my students. He would always tell them the same thing: spend your life working to produce the one thing that you would "pin to your headstone." It is an admonition to create something useful and remarkable, to be the best that you can be. I know Kerry-Jayne well enough to know that she wouldn't give a damn about a headstone, but I also know her well enough to know that, if she did, *New Zealand Seabirds: A Natural History* is the thing that she would pin to it.

It is a testimony to Kerry-Jayne Wilson's determination that, in the face of a cancer far worse than any 10-metre breaking wave, she was able to finish her book and see it published. In lieu of it ever gracing her headstone, I suggest that you get it and put it on your bookshelf or coffee table. This is Kerry-Jayne's parting gift to us all.

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