

HIGH SEAS ADVENTURER

Author, painter, conservationist, explorer and prospective eradicator of rats, Peter Harrison tells Steve Newman what led to his status as the world authority on seabirds, and where the rats come into the equation...

Peter Harrison could be considered the world's foremost authority on seabirds. Some say he has seen more seabirds than anyone else, past or present.

But there's more to this remarkable man than just specialist birdwatching. Peter is an active conservationist, who has been made a Member of the British Empire for services to natural history. He has led scientific research expeditions throughout the world, from the Arctic to the Antarctic and across the islands of the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, and he is noted for his quick thinking and derring-do in tight situations. He is a co-founder of wildlife cruise company Zegram Expeditions, a Fellow of The Explorers Club and passionate about giving people fresh insights into wildlife and especially birds.

Not only that, but Peter has written and illustrated more than a dozen books. His *Seabirds: An Identification Guide*, published in 1983, is considered the Bible of seabird ID. Every major colour and plumage phase of the nearly 300 species of world seabirds is shown. ➡



Peter Harrison's words and pictures have brought seabirds to life for generations of birdwatchers



**TOP: Spectacled Guillemot
RIGHT: Horned Puffin
LEFT: Whiskered Auklet**

He is currently working on a new edition, but I wondered why he felt it necessary to produce a new version when the current one is still considered to be the last word in seabird identification?

“My original seabird guide was published over a quarter of a century ago,” says Peter. “A lot has changed since then, particularly in taxonomy and in our knowledge of the movements and biology of different species. My new Seabird Handbook will be published in two volumes. Volume I will cover identification and will have well over 200 full colour plates. Each plate will have all the plumage phases of each bird.

“Volume II will cover biology and life histories and will have over 1,000 photographs, most of which have never been seen before. It is a seven-year project with publication aimed for 2015, and the new books are designed to last another 25 years.”

Sea change

The original seabirds guide was the result of the kind of revolutionary life change that many of us might contemplate in an idle moment and then dismiss as madness. As Peter explains: “I was 25 years old in the early 70s, working as a civil servant in London, when I suddenly thought, ‘this isn’t what I want to do’. I had always been interested in seabirds and I knew that there had been only two previous attempts to cover all the world’s known feathered ocean-dwellers in a single volume. I also knew that the last guidebook about them had been written in 1927 by WB Alexander, so hardly up to date with current thinking.

“With only a little thought, I gave up my job, sold everything, bought a Land Rover and set off around the world. For seven years I travelled around, apple-picking in Australia, working on a crayfish boat in New Zealand and driving from the tip of South America to Alaska. I was robbed at gunpoint twice and was lost in the Sahara for a couple of days; there were lots of adventures. On my return, it took me four years to get the book published, so all in all it took 11 years.”

Writing the text for the book was only half of the job, as it’s Peter’s carefully accurate illustrations that transform it into a complete work of art. In fact, many of his drawings and paintings hang in private collections and museums around the world.

“As a professional artist, author and screenwriter I have over 25,000 images of birds at home which I can use to help me in my work,” says Peter. “I do dedicate a fair bit of my time to producing wildlife paintings to support environmental projects such as Save the Albatross, Falklands Islands conservation, Charles Darwin’s Institute work in the Galapagos and Conservation International’s Wild Dog project in Botswana.”

Travelling the world supporting such projects and creating opportunities for wildlife education are still central to Peter’s life.

“My wife Shirley and I were among the first people in the expedition cruising movement. In the 1980s a small group of us met while leading expeditions for one of the first adventure travel operators, and we joined forces and set up our own company. Now Zegrahm is widely thought to be the leader in the field.

“When we travel to remote communities, we bring school and medical supplies and also sports equipment. Plus, there is the joy of the natural world. Personally, after 140 countries, including 150 visits to Antarctica alone, I can honestly say I never stop learning about birds and wildlife. We feel it’s important to educate our guests in the hope that they may become as passionate about natural history and the planet as we are.

“One of the greatest gifts I receive from the people who travel with us is when one of them says to me: ‘You have changed my life, Peter. I never looked at birds before and now I have my own binoculars and I am really interested in them.’”

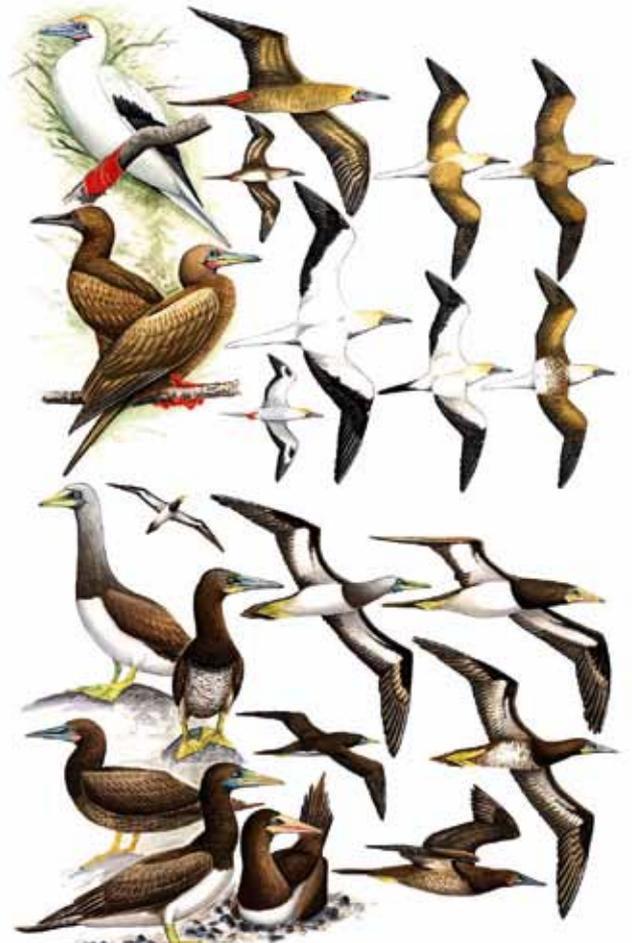
Peter’s next project will be a major challenge. In September next year, he and Shirley will be leading a Zegrahm expedition to Henderson Island in the Pitcairn group to assist the RSPB in their project to restore the wildlife balance on the Island.

Peter says: “There are five endemic species of birds there: The Henderson Fruit Dove, Lorikeet, Crake, Reed Warbler and the only known nesting site of Henderson Petrel. Unfortunately Pacific Rats kill an estimated 95% of the chicks of these species and others such as the Fairy Tern and Murphy’s Petrel. The plan is to try to raise £1.7 million to eradicate the rats so the birds can recover to their former numbers of millions rather than the thousands they are now.”

A tall order, but you suspect Peter is the very man to fulfill it. 

Want to know more?

www.rspb.org.uk/supporthendersonisland
www.zeco.com



From top to bottom: Red-footed Booby; Brown Booby; Pigeon Guillemot; Black Guillemot