

Richard J. Cuthbert 2017

Seabirds beyond the Mountain Crest. The history, natural history and conservation of Hutton's shearwater

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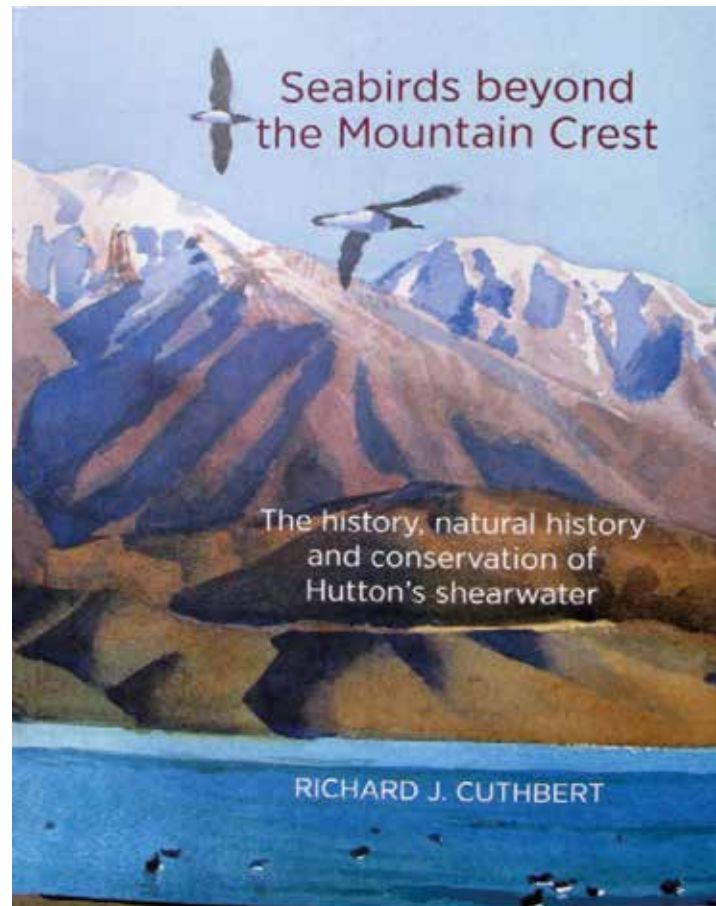
Seabirds Beyond the Mountain Crest tells the intriguing story of the Hutton's shearwater *Puffinus huttoni*, a species breeding only at two remote locations high in the Kaikoura Mountains, in the southern Alps on the South Island of New Zealand. Breeding at high altitude in inland snow covered mountains of mainland New Zealand is unique among seabirds.

The book starts with the author holding the holotype collected in 1912. He thoroughly describes the historical adventures, rivalry and many other facts about the people involved with the discovery and identification of the species, and its separation from the much more common fluttering shearwater *P. gavia*. Then, the author thoroughly explains that it is ornithologist Geoff Harrow who discovered the two remaining nesting sites of Hutton's Shearwater in 1965(!). For five decades, Geoff visited the mountains whenever he could to observe and record the birds, and to encourage the Department of Conservation and its predecessors to take steps to conserve this endangered species.

Richard Cuthbert's fieldwork started with his arrival by helicopter in the remote Kowhai Valley in September 1996. Over the course of three breeding seasons he deals with much more than the plain research of this species. His story includes detailed habitat descriptions but also anecdotes about more or less all the other living creatures in the valleys, including his co-workers and the odd visitors (e.g. David Attenborough). His experiences with wētā (a group of endemic crickets), introduced chamois, all bird species around, especially the local kea, let you feel the authors' enthusiasm, visualise the scenery and smell the colony.

One of the main questions of his study was why all colonies except the two were deserted. What follows is a thorough research on the ecology and behaviour of introduced stoats. Indeed, the study proved that the stoats prey upon shearwater chicks and even on the adults. However, stoats are not the main cause of decline. On the contrary, the stoats themselves have difficulty to survive the winters. This pattern, known as 'inverse density-dependent predation', is predicted to occur in situations where predator numbers are limited by factors other than prey density.

So why do only two colonies exist? After visiting all nine of the known extinct colonies the author discovers these to be almost completely deserted by any living creature. The abundance of life on many seabird colonies is driven by the fertilising nutrients from seabirds; thus, no shearwaters means no plants, no insects, *et cetera*. However, one of the few species which are present in the former colonies are pigs, which were absent from the two remaining colonies. Trampling burrows, eating vegetation and eating



chicks, the pigs turned out to be the main cause of disappearance of the former colonies.

After the research period, efforts succeeded in creating a new colony on the Kaikoura Peninsula by translocating chicks. This success was timely, as a couple of years later an earthquake destroyed 20-30% of the two old colonies.

If I have to mention one thing I missed in this book, is that no work at sea was involved. Nevertheless, Richard Cuthbert's book about the 200,000 Hutton's shearwaters is very informative, enlivened by quite some photographs and is easy to read. At the end you feel you have been there too.

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Hutton's shearwater, 27 October 2012, off Kaikoura, New Zealand. Photo: Leendert van Bergeijk