

ISLANDS BEYOND THE HORIZON: THE LIFE OF TWENTY OF THE WORLD'S MOST REMOTE PLACES

Lovegrove, R. 2012. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 228 pp., one map, 21 black and white illustrations, 20 colour plates. Hardcover: ISBN 978-0-19-960649-8. £16.99.

This book is a quick survey of 20 of the most inaccessible islands on the planet. It is neither a travelogue nor a summary of the history, natural or human. Rather, each chapter is devoted to one island, with short vignettes of its history and current human occupation, along with minimal descriptions of the flora and fauna of each. Likewise, the geology and geography of each island is summarized for the layperson, and the island's ecology and weather are described vividly, so that the reader feels as if she or he is on the island experiencing what the author experienced. Additionally, Lovegrove sums up the myriad of environmental concerns of each island and what the governments have attempted to do to mitigate these, but he often gives no definitive solution to the problem or what is planned next.

If you expect detailed lists of breeding seasons and rigorous inventories of seabird species, or indeed of any flora and fauna, this book is not for you. It would be a great book for someone with a sense of adventure who wanted to check off remote places on their travel lists. For seabird biologists, the book is a tempting start for delving into other books or reports to glean more information about each island or to find data gaps for seabirds on each island as a starting point for a grant proposal. And there are many gaps. A bibliography would also be helpful for further reading on each island.

As an example of interesting information unrelated to seabirds, I did not know that, like seabirds, fruit bats had been decimated by the invasive brown tree snake on Guam and that there are generous rewards for information on anyone convicted of killing a fruit bat. Lovegrove's story of the seabirds so negatively affected by the snake is a dismal one, and the level of destruction is clearly laid out. He does offer possible solutions to the snake problem, and one can only hope that the poison bait suggestion is soon implemented. He has many examples of individual seabird species, their history on each island, and what their population growth has been.

Many of the islands Lovegrove covers are familiar, but many are not. I had to look up more than a few of them on an atlas. They are Wrangel, the Chinijo Archipelago, Jan Mayen, Mykines, Guam, San Blas, Ascension, Fernandode de Noronha, Mingulay, Pico (Azores), Tristan de Cunha, Vigur, St. Kilda, South Georgia, Halfmoon, Great Skellig, Île aux Aigrettes, Solovetski Islands, St. Peter and St. Paul Rocks, and Tuamotu Archipelago.

The main drawback of the book is that there are no good maps. The heading at the start of each chapter is a black and white drawing of the shape of the island. These have no scale, nor are there any familiar landmarks from which one could place each island. There is a larger world map before the chapters begin that shows each island. The problem here is that, while each island is named and numbered in the key and the numbers appear on the map, there is no grid superimposed to make it easy for the reader to actually locate the island if he or she has no clue which ocean it is in.

For those planning on doing research on any of the islands, Lovegrove is helpful in indicating the safest approach to each, as well as naming the best landing beach. He describes the weather in great detail, as well as the closest human habitation, which is helpful if one is planning on doing research on one of the islands. His lists of seabirds unfortunately do not include the scientific names, so one is left wondering which species it is when he states "the kittiwake" or "the puffin" — it is up to the reader to find this out.

However, to get a sense of just how diverse islands on this planet are, and to feel as if you have indeed travelled to one of them, this book is a perfect fast read.

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