

# Far From Land: The Mysterious Lives of Seabirds

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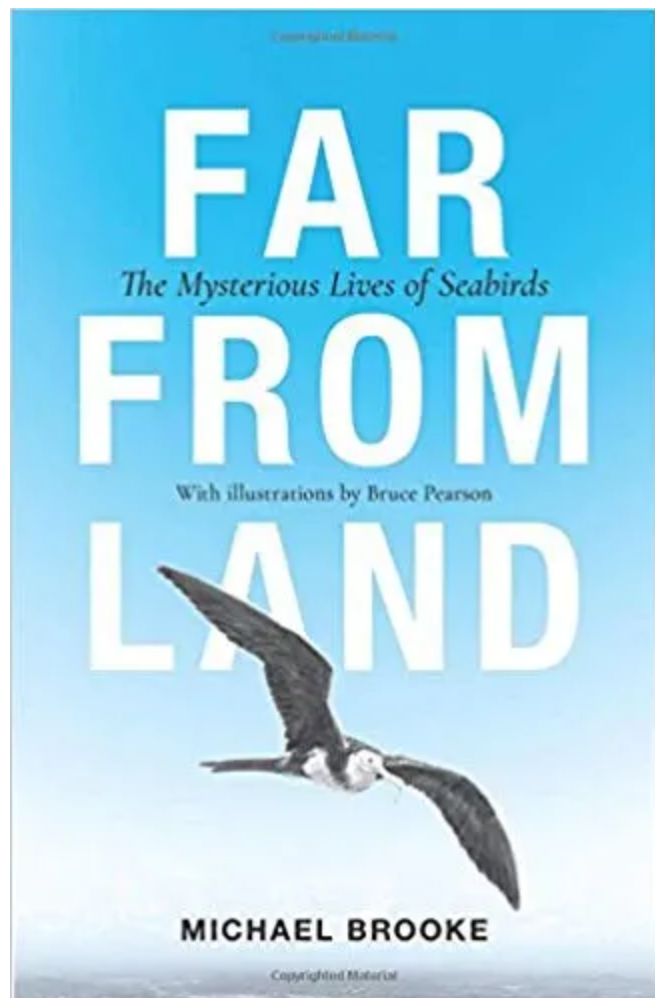
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Michael Brooke, Princeton University Press, 2018

Michael Brooke has been fascinated by seabirds for the past 40 years, starting while in high school in the United Kingdom. He has worked with seabirds on the islands of northern Scotland, learning that despite their cute appearance, Puffins are really “horrible to handle.” Over the years, he’s journeyed to the southern ocean to study Shearwaters and climbed mountains on an island west of Chile to census Petrels. He has worked in South Africa and Antarctica, chasing seabirds in some of the most remote places on earth. His account of their travels (and his own) is fascinating.

Brooke’s work details the life histories and peregrinations of a wide variety of seabird species. But what makes *Far From Land* so interesting is Brooke’s account of the use of modern electronics. Brooke explains that the minute devices are “revolutionizing our knowledge of the activities of seabirds at sea.” Considering that species like the albatrosses spend years at sea, coming back to land only to nest and raise their young, we have had very little understanding of their travels until recently. Brooke tells us about their voyages around the oceans of the world, intent on finding good sources of food for their young and themselves. They take advantage of wind and wave patterns to find resources. Without the electronic devices attached to the seabirds, we would have little idea of the distances they fly, how fast they travel, and where and how deep they feed.

Seabird ornithologists, we learn, don’t use only GPS devices to track the movements of the birds over enormous expanses of trackless ocean. They also measure how deep they dive and how long they spend at depth.



They learn when they open their bills to swallow prey and how long and fast they flap their wings. They learn when they are flying and when they are sitting on the surface. As a result, the discoveries have been astounding.

Bar-tailed Godwits leave Alaska in September heading south. By late September and early October, they arrive in New Zealand, a single week-long flight of 10,000 km or roughly 6,200 miles. Arctic Terns were tracked from breeding grounds in Greenland and Iceland to the Weddell Sea in Antarctica and back again, a journey of 72,000 km. Accounts like these dominate the first three chapters of *Far From Land*, which focus on the migrations of first-year, immature, and adult seabirds. Later chapters track seabird speed, areas where seabirds find food, and the depths to which seabirds dive.

A female Grey-headed Albatross has been tracked flying downwind at 130 km/hr. You are not supposed to drive that fast (roughly 80 mph) on our interstates. She might get a ticket. Albatrosses lock their wings and glide for hours and use a technique called dynamic soaring, which forms a zig-zag pattern, to maintain their height and travel forward as fast as they can. Their hearts beats at 80 beats/min while soaring, little more than the heart rates of the birds sitting on the water.

Cormorants in Colorado dive a few inches it seems into Evergreen Lake, but on the ocean, they search for prey at 30-40 meters. Little Dovekies dive to a maximum of 25 meters and stay under for 1.5 minutes. The much larger and heavier Emperor Penguins dive to over 400 meters and stay under for longer than 12 minutes.

Following all the stories of outstanding feats by seabirds of all types and sizes, Michael Brooke ends his account on a somber note. Seabirds are incredibly endangered. They are threatened not only by climate change but on mankind's seeming goal of catching and eating all of the world's fish. Fishermen and seabirds compete for the same catch. Brooke suggests ways that humans and seabirds might co-exist by sharing the sea and limiting our human catch to areas not frequented by seabirds.

Brooke is clearly thrilled by the birds he has studied for 40 years and is intent on learning more about their amazing journeys with the help of increasingly sophisticated (and small) technology. His account is quite detailed, but always amazing. We marvel as he does at "the ability of seabirds to cope with a salty medium so different [from] land."