BOOK REVIEWS


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If you enjoy watching whales and dolphins in European waters (or in most other Northern Hemisphere seas, for that matter), you will soon notice that species diversity is rather limited, as are the abundances of those cetaceans that do occur, so that predictable encounter opportunities may not be frequent. A glance at the globe shows that the aquatic realm of marine mammals is much greater in the Southern Hemisphere than elsewhere. Hence, in the southern oceans one finds not only higher abundances but also higher species diversity; this beautiful and expertly crafted book is aimed squarely at the abundant and diverse nature of these southern waters. One cetacean hot spot in the south can be found in the waters around Cape Agulhas. However, author Peter Best does not leave any doubt that in his impressive book his focus is not limited to species of his native South Africa. Instead, he describes in depth all species known to occur between 20°S and 80°E, and from the equator to the Antarctic. This vast area of sea encompasses many islands, including Ascension, Tristan da Cunha, Bouvet, Seychelles, and Kerguelen Islands in 3 different oceans (Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean, and Southern Ocean).

In several places these waters are extremely fertile, as currents and upwellings bring nutrients toward the sunlit surface, as contributors Isabelle Ansorge and Johann Lutjeharms describe when introducing habitats of cetaceans (pp. 5–13). The South Atlantic Current continues as cold Benguela Current northward along the western coast of Namibia, whereas the warm Agulhas Current descends from Madagascar toward the southern tip of the African continent where it is deflected eastward. During this process huge eddies (Agulhas rings) split off and remain for months as isolated water bodies roaming the southern Atlantic. South of the Subtropical Convergence the Antarctic is continuously encircled by the Antarctic Circumpolar Current, which is also one of the drivers of world climate.

This diversity of marine ecosystems in the studied area allows for coexistence of at least 52 species of whales and dolphins. This is more than twice as many as have been recorded in the North Atlantic and adjacent seas, for example. Chapter by chapter the author introduces species enhanced by the marvelous color drawings of Pieter Folkens. In addition, 1 or 2 typical photographs of each species in the wild are depicted, and descriptions of skull morphology and further information are provided in every species account. Only for 3 rare species of beaked whales—True’s, Andrew’s, and ginkgo-toothed—are photographs of live animals unavailable. In addition to sections titled Appearance, Distribution and migrations, External commensals and parasites, Food and feeding behaviour, Reproduction and growth, Behaviour and vocalisations, and Conservation status, and the usual information provided by other identification guides and cetacean textbooks, the author provides insights from decades of extensive personal research. Peter Best has studied cetaceans at the University of Pretoria for more than 40 years and can now impress the reader with a multitude of amazing facts and stories from his rich experience.

Almost all species chapters display detailed distribution maps (the pygmy sperm whale on p. 91 is an exception). In addition, there are usually 2 boxes embedded in each chapter, one with biometric information such as length-to-weight relationship and skeletal data and the other with some useful and entertaining information regarding cetacean biology and conservation. Skeletal remains, especially skulls, can be essential for identification of specimens and are often the only useful remains of a stranded animal after some time has passed. This is why the book provides detailed views of skull and lower jaw from various angles for most species. Moreover, dentition is used as basis for an identification key of the odontocetes in the southern African subregion (pp. 18–23), not unlike the one provided by Würsig et al. (2000) for the cetaceans of the Gulf of Mexico. To make this well-balanced book complete 36 pages of bibliography testify to the extensive information contained in this volume, and a useful 4-page glossary briefly explains some of the most important terms to provide the cetacean novice with the same enjoyment as the professional.

Mistakes such as the ventral coloration in the fin whale drawing (p. 70), with a dark lower right jaw and light lower left jaw (but correct in the lateral view directly above), are very rare. The wealth of information provided elevates this volume, in spite of its coffee table format, to a most comprehensive handbook on cetaceans of the Southern Hemisphere. Even in the Northern Hemisphere, for which several fine treatises exist on regional cetacean assemblages, such as The Marine Mammals of the Gulf of Mexico by Würsig et al. (2000) or Whales and Dolphins of the North Sea by Camphuysen et al. (2006), there are few volumes of similar geographic and taxonomic breadth. One can only wish for the publication of a book of similar quality and coverage on the cetaceans of the North Atlantic (or North Pacific). In