

There will always be a need for high-quality illustrations in identification guides, even those with multimedia elements. These European Storm-petrel figures, by Ian Lewington, are from the new *Storm-petrels & Bulwer's Petrel* guide.

write scripts and narrate DVDs.

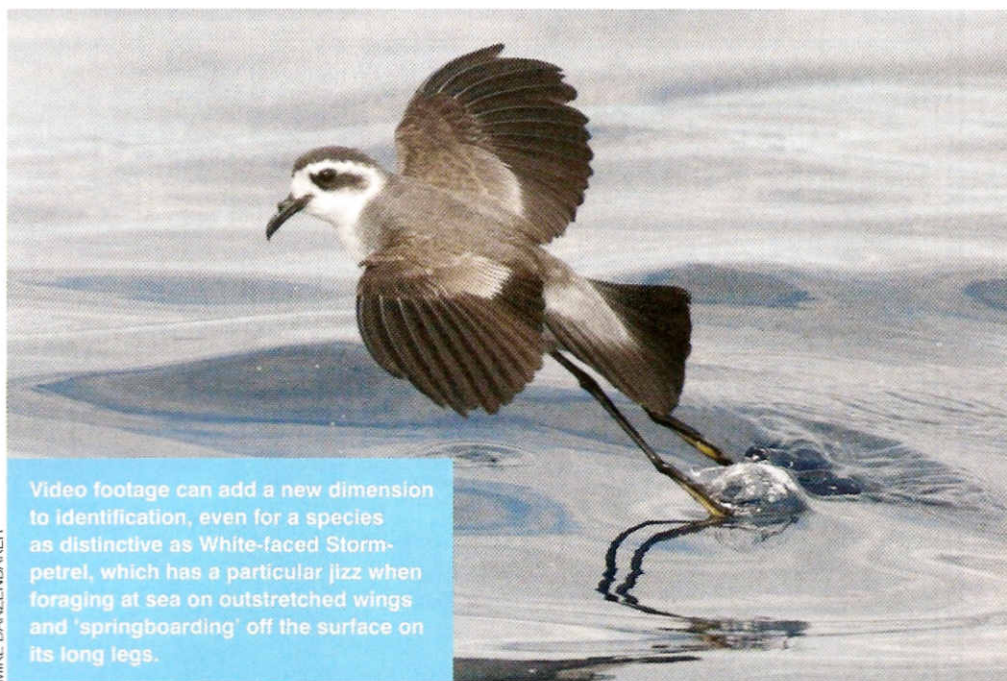
Then there was the small matter of getting enough video to make the DVDs. Comprehensive coverage of North Atlantic seabirds also involves videoing some species that are found mainly in the South Atlantic. The logistics were full of twists and turns. Expeditions included the Atlantic Odyssey in 2006, which took in Antarctica, South Orkney, South Georgia, Gough, Tristan da Cunha, St Helena, Ascension and onward to Cape Verde.

Working on expedition cruise ships offered a paid means of getting footage, but nearly led to disaster – Bob was ship's ornithologist on *MV Explorer* when it hit an iceberg and sunk in Antarctica in 2007. Then research into standard definition (SD) camcorders by Panasonic produced 3CCD technology – a three-mirror system – which vastly improved colour and definition, so we returned south and refilmed all of the Southern Ocean species in 2010.

The first volume – *Storm-petrels & Bulwer's Petrel* – did involve filming in the North Atlantic, too: on 19 consecutive days off Hatteras, North Carolina, United States (May-June 2009); off the Selvagens Islands, Desertas Islands and Madeira in three of the last four years (May-July); off Cape Verde Islands in April 2009; and in the Pacific Ocean off California in September 2007 and 2008 for dark-rumped Leach's Storm-petrel. There is still more videoing to do for the upcoming guides; the next two are *Pterodroma* Petrels and *Albatrosses, Shearwaters & Procellaria* Petrels. As you can imagine, the costs involved are huge and present another hurdle.

Future technology

We are not technology forecasters, but it seems to us that digital still photography has entered the process of



Video footage can add a new dimension to identification, even for a species as distinctive as White-faced Storm-petrel, which has a particular jizz when foraging at sea on outstretched wings and 'springboarding' off the surface on its long legs.

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fine tuning, while digital videography is still improving dramatically. So it is film that could further change and improve multimedia identification guides. The current switch from SD technology to high definition (HD) is significant, but does it really add that much to our concept?

Moving footage from an identification point of view is about recreating real experiences, and seabird encounters are not often 'in your face HD'. SD 3CCD technology is more than adequate for our purposes. Close up, HD footage is very pleasing to watch, but a myopic obsession with HD-quality videography would detract from what our concept is all about; namely recreating real encounters at various ranges, in different conditions, with birds only occasionally 'up close and in HD'. The main benefit we have experienced with HD to date is watching freeze-frames, where the image is much clearer, and it is easier to study changing poses and postures.

There is also the issue of information handling and storage. To work on a project like ours in HD requires a powerful microprocessor and lots of RAM for handling information and Blu-ray technology for storage – Blu-ray has five times the storage capacity of DVD. Inevitably, HD and Blu-ray will replace SD and DVDs. Of course, with technology, there is always the unforeseeable. Whatever the future holds, it seems that we are all swiftly becoming 'techno-birders'. ■



Further reading

Storm-petrels and Bulwer's Petrel by Bob Flood and Ashley Fisher is the first in their North Atlantic Seabirds series. Order for £37.99 – usual price £39.99 – on page 63 or go to www.birdwatch.co.uk.

Hints and tips on videoing seabirds

- Don't try to get the image of the bird too large in the frame – seabirds are rarely close up, and in any case you will not be able to track them.
- Take, take and retake to get the clip you are after. Take close-up and distant shots, in all weather conditions, and shoot travelling, foraging and feeding flight behaviours.
- Try to get at least 12 seconds per clip, as this is just long enough to appreciate the flight behaviour.
- Balance videoing with actual observation, otherwise your identification skills will not improve.
- Large 'professional' video recorders are virtually redundant in most conditions – they are too heavy and bulky, cannot be held steady enough and are not suited to at-sea conditions.
- Top-of-the-range handheld camcorders that are easy to carry and travel with are best for filming.
- We use the SD Panasonic 3CCD MiniDV camcorders (NV-GS400/500) – they are no longer manufactured, but often available on eBay for around £350.
- We are experimenting with HD Panasonic (HDC-SD700), at about £700 if you shop around, which is the first HD camcorder that suits our purposes and has a pull-out viewfinder – it is impossible to video flying seabirds using only the LCD display.