

BOOK REVIEW

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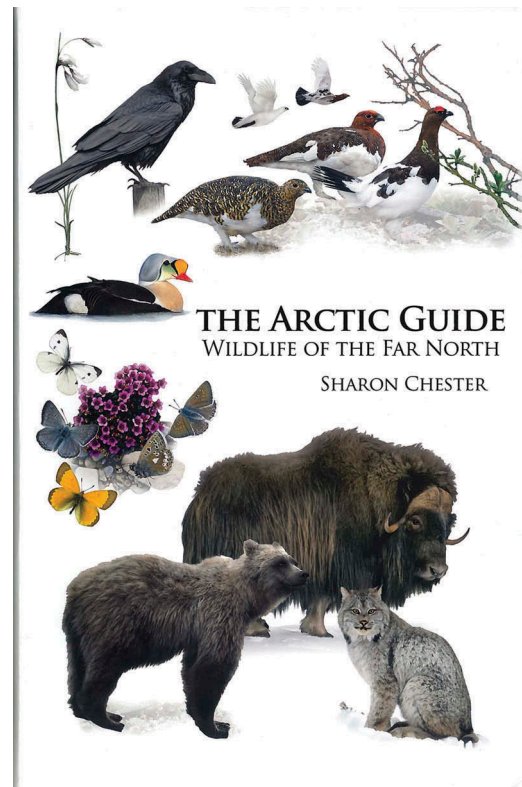
**The Arctic guide: wildlife of the Far North**, by Sharon Chester, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016, 542 pp., £18.89 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-691-13975-3.

*The Arctic guide: wildlife of the Far North* is an ambitious and superbly illustrated volume by Sharon Chester, the illustrator, photographer, author and cruise-ship natural history lecturer who has earlier given us *Antarctic birds and seals* (1993) and *A wildlife guide to Chile* (2008), among other publications.

Following informative introductory sections describing and defining the Arctic, *The Arctic guide* offers comprehensive coverage of the region's species of mammals, birds, lizards and frogs. There are also sections on a selection of insects and fishes, as well as a 109-page section devoted to cyanobacteria, fungi and plants. Accounts of species likely to capture the interest of a visitor to the Arctic are lengthy and detailed – for example, reindeer/caribou (six pages) – and include descriptions of subspecies, whereas entries for other species are much briefer and make no mention of recognized subspecies. The inclusion of domestic animals (for example, four and a half pages about sled dogs) is somewhat puzzling in a volume packaged as a guide to wildlife and – weighing over a kilogram – at the upper size limit for a portable guidebook.

It is a pleasure to see the species accounts preceded by descriptions of the higher taxonomic groups to which the species belong. However, there are a few inaccuracies and inconsistencies here. Chester writes, for example, that in the Family Felidae, “The pupil of the eye contracts vertically” (p. 71). This is true of the smaller members of the cat family; however, the pupils of the big cats (leopards, tigers and so on) are round and do not contract to vertical slits. In the description of the Family Canidae, no mention is made of pupil shape at all (in the dog family, as among the cats, some species have vertically contracting pupils and some do not).

The species accounts are also marred by occasional errors. I am assured by experts, for example, that the ivory gull does not breed on the island of Jan Mayen. The king eider does not spend winters on the open sea, at least not in northern Scandinavia. The walrus is not the largest pinniped (that honour goes to the southern elephant seal). Ringed seals mate on fast ice not on ice floes. The presented timeline of mating, implantation, gestation, weaning and mating again for ringed seals is awry: the timing does not add up. Bearded seals do not maintain breathing holes by chewing the ice that forms on the openings; the cause of their tooth wear is their benthic diet. A few statements are head-scratchers. For example, I am not sure what to make of the author's characterization of the wolverine as “Even-tempered despite a fierce demeanor” (p. 86). A conscientious editor might have ironed away some of these irregularities and also helped to trim the text in places. For example, the Great Race of Mercy, in which diphtheria medication was transported to



Nome, Alaska, by dog sled in 1925, is a gripping tale, but does it merit nearly two pages in a wildlife guidebook?

It seems churlish to highlight errors in a work of such magnitude, ambition and beauty. *The Arctic guide* is clearly a product of passion and hard work. However, readers should be aware that the strength of this book lies in its usefulness in helping the bearer identify animals (and plants) in the field. It should not be relied upon as a reference book: presented facts should be checked against authoritative sources.

## References

- Chester S. 1993. *Antarctic birds and seals*. San Mateo, CA: Wandering Albatross.  
Chester S. 2008. *Wildlife guide to Chile*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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