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THE FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF AUSTRALIA

by Graham Pizzey and Frank Knight

1997. Angus & Robinson, Sydney. Pp. 576, 240 x 150 mm, \$35.

Comparisons may be odious but with the arrival of a new field guide they are not only inevitable but essential. The relatively small bird watching community of Australia has been very well served with modern and excellent field guides of late. This one is a special case: a new book by a well established and respected author whose earlier guide is still regarded by many as containing the best information but was let down by the plates.

So, does this one 'work'? Should you ditch the well worn Slater or Simpson & Day, or hang onto the old Pizzey? These are important questions for old and new birders (and book sellers) and deserve some detailed treatment. Therefore, this review is a joint effort and attempts to assimilate the ideas generated from a number of people, with plenty of dissension as well as agreement.

The Field Guide to the Birds of Australia, with text by Graham Pizzey and illustrations by Frank Knight, is an attractive book, and will market well. It is remarkably cheap (typically around \$35) and therefore in the same price category as its rivals. The cover, with bold close-ups in warm tones which offset the coldness of the background colour, is white plastic. The fly-leaves both have handy maps: a hypsometric map of Australia in the front and a useful meridian grid map in the back.

Although called a 'field guide', at a hefty 1.13 kg and measuring 240 x 150 x 32 mm, this is not what one could call or use as a pocket guide. For those not wishing to carry it, the guide could be used as a reference to take into the field but leave in the car or camp.

The introduction is very good. Here is the basis for properly understanding what the rest of the book is about. The author has been particularly careful to draw the new birder in, pointing out the necessary snippets of knowledge needed to use the book intelligently. Many colour illustrations make it easy to understand the terms used and the requirements needed by the user. One aspect we did feel was missing was a section on moulting, a phenomenon often poorly understood by many birders, including experienced ones.

In the main guide component of the book, each page opening has the text, distribution map and illustrations for each species, averting the need to turn pages for

additional species information (a major improvement on the old Pizzey). The text follows the standard formula of English name, scientific name, length, other names, description of male, female, and juvenile and immature where applicable, similar species, voice, habitat, breeding season, nest, eggs, range and status. A useful edge bar is included on each page enabling bird families to be located quickly. There is a generosity of space for each species (many plates only contain a few species; hence the thickness) that is impressive and refreshing. This allows species to be rendered in typical poses, a point often overlooked in many field guides. There are several habitat vignettes as backgrounds to birds which add to the aesthetics and perhaps the contextualisation of some species.

A section about classification and the naming of birds succinctly tells the story of the Linnean system, DNA molecular techniques, evolution and historical considerations. This is followed by introductions to the families, describing general features such as food, worldwide distribution, and the number of species in the family both worldwide and in Australia. A comprehensive Glossary helps the user become proficient with some of the language of birding and ornithology.

This guide follows the new and authoritative taxonomy of Christidis & Boles (1994), although with some minor anomalies: the Australian ringnecks have been split into two species and some vagrant waders are included though have not yet been accepted on the formal Australian list. The use of Christidis & Boles is important for two reasons. First, this taxonomy is based on the latest molecular and comparative techniques and will therefore coincide with many of the other up-to-date ornithological works being produced around the world. Second, this means that you may be in for a surprise when trying to find a particular group or family. For example, the megapodes are now toward the front of the book instead of lurking just after the raptors.

Yes, it is big and clear and will sell by the truckload. But a field guide must rest finally on its ability to function as a reliable and effective guide to identification. And in this there are some serious problems. As expected, most of the experts we consulted were able to find things wrong with 'their' group: bill shapes and lengths in waders; eye position; and other minutiae. But more important were issues that many people mentioned independently and the most prominent of these was colour. This may be the perennial problem associated with colour separations preserving the quality of the original plates in mass-produced editions. But so

many of the plates here seem to be, well, dull; it may be a faithful rendering of old museum light on dead bird skins but those waders and seabirds (and bowerbirds and swifts) have lost their 'light'. While certainly not every plate is affected, many species are: black has become a dark, dull ash (e.g. the frigatebirds and some shearwaters and petrels) or true dark brown is now dull brown (numerous waders). Strangely, the whites are frequently greyish, possibly because of the use of flat white backgrounds. These are not trivial concerns: Will a new birder recognise that dark arcing seabird as a Sooty Shearwater, based on the light grey-brown bird in the guide? Possibly not.

The central question is this: Does this field guide facilitate identification? The old Pizzey was unparalleled for information, and a concern for many birders was how much of this is retained. The result is a mixture. Most of the text is familiarly detailed and careful, and even much of the prose retains its clarity. Nonetheless, there are some strange omissions, almost all of which could have aided identification. Combined with this, the plates also have limitations. They are undoubtedly excellent works of art and many positively glow, but certain groups are not well distinguished (eg. snipes and terns). The lack of 'rear-end' detail in either text or plates is a serious limitation for wader enthusiasts and the many beach-patrollers will find very little to assist in determining the identity of beachcast specimens. In many cases the diagnostic features of confusing species are not well attended to (e.g. Roseate, White-fronted, Common and Arctic Terns). Sometimes a subspecies is mentioned or shown but not described (e.g. Buller's Albatross — we are left to trust the illustration for the subtle distinctions, but how many would pick the depth of the yellow stripe on the lower mandible?). Similarly, while Pizzey remains a master of verbalising calls and song, there is no mention made of several key calls or features of calls — a worrying aspect for a mainly reliable authority.

Finally, perhaps pedantically (but related closely to the central issue of identification), there is the use and labelling of young birds as 'juvenile' or 'immature'. Making sense of those non-adults can be a major frus-

tration for birders of all levels and addressing this problem is a crucial component of any contemporary field guide. The generally accepted definition of 'juvenile' is a bird in its first pennaceous plumage, while 'immature' is much less well defined but seems to be becoming a general term for any intermediate stages between juveniles and adults. Unfortunately, even this fairly logical if loose terminology has not been used here; Pizzey correctly defines 'juvenile' in the glossary but virtually every juvenile illustrated has been incorrectly labelled as 'immature', a term also applied to genuine immatures. The basis for only occasionally using the term juvenile in the body of the book (for a few raptors, frigatebirds and boobies) is unclear to us. Adding to this confusion are the numerous examples of species in which there are marked differences between adult and juvenile plumages (e.g. woodswallows, most robins and many flycatchers) yet the juvenile is not illustrated or mentioned. These features seriously undermine the book's value as a guide to aging and (in some important cases) to identification, and adds to worries about its overall reliability.

After saying this, there are specialist guides to seabirds, waterfowl, shorebirds, skuas, swallows and martins plus, of course, the wealth of detail in the *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds*, to which birders can refer. Equally so, it would be nice if more of the detail in these books had been incorporated into this new field guide. While this new guide will doubtless allow most birders to identify most birds they encounter, and will certainly give the other guides serious competition, it is not yet definitive.

Reference

Christidis, L. & Boles, W.E. 1994. *The Taxonomy and Species of Birds of Australia and its Territories*. RAOU Monograph 2, Melbourne.

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