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**RAILS: A GUIDE TO THE RAILS, CRAKES,
GALLINULES AND COOTS OF THE WORLD**
By B. Taylor and B. van Perlo

1999. Pica Press, Mountfield. Pp. 600, 43 colour plates,
many figures and maps. \$87.00

Twenty years is a long time between handbooks for some groups of birds. A lot of work has been done on the rail family since Ripley's (1977) treatise on this group was published. Three new extant and several new fossil species have been described, and two major phylogenies, numerous observations, conservation strategies and formal studies

have been published in this time. This work was, 'designed as a comprehensive guide and handbook to the rails of the world'. In most cases, it does provide a comprehensive summary of the current knowledge of rallid biology, as a good handbook should. More, importantly perhaps, this work also highlights the many areas in rallid biology where more work is urgently required.

The general structure of *Rails* is similar to that of other books of this genre. The general introduction gives a brief overview of family characteristics, taxonomy and conservation and also defines the subheadings used in the species accounts. The readily accessible nature of the information makes this book easy to use. The general introduction is followed by a series of colour plates that include all extant species and some recently extinct ones. Colour morphs and some subspecies have also been illustrated, which underlines the plumage variation that occurs in some species, as well as juvenile plumages. Unfortunately, the actual pictures are flat and lifeless and sometimes contradict the text as for the Tasmanian Native Hen (*Gallinula mortierii*) chick: the text describes the chick's bill as black, but the accompanying illustration shows the bill to be white. Inaccurate and inconsistent illustrations can lead to confusion.

The bulk of this book is taken up with species accounts that provide a detailed summary of our current knowledge of all aspects of rail biology and behaviour. These have been divided into categories — nomenclature, identification, voice, description of different subspecies and geographic variation, moult, distribution, status and movements, diet, habitat, social behaviour and breeding season. Descriptions of voice and geographic variation are particularly useful for this family, as many forest dwelling species are often heard, but rarely seen. Details of substantial variation in plumage within a species allow for easier field identification. Other areas lacking in the species accounts are: distribution maps are often too small and the regions of interest mentioned in the text are not marked clearly, if at all, so that the maps do not complement the written descriptions of the species' distributions. The sources of information for some species are vague, particularly where most of the information was taken from a regional handbook (such as HANZAB, *Birds of the Western Palearctic* etc.) Whilst this only tends to occur where little further information is available, it is disappointing that a summary of previous reviews is presented, rather than a summary of the primary literature. Whilst these criticisms may seem pedantic, it is attention to such detail that distinguishes a good compendium from a truly great one. In this case, it seems that the structure and content of the book have been well thought out, but something was lost in the execution of those ideas.

One of the most obvious aspects of *Rails* is the focus on conservation issues within the Rallidae. There are discussions on the probable causes of recent extinctions and

threats to extant populations, including methods of potentially alleviating these threats. Considering the high rate of extinction in the Rallidae (probably 17 species and four races of extant species since 1600), such discussion is absolutely necessary. However, the authors make several apparently unsubstantiated statements in this section, such as: 'Although forest destruction must have adversely affected its [the Buff spotted Flufftail *Sarothrura elegans*] numbers in some areas, it is probably holding its own by virtue of its ability to colonize degraded forest habitats, overgrown cultivation and exotic vegetation in suburban gardens.' The authors account for this lack of referencing in the introduction; however unreferenced statements are not constructive when discussing conservation issues. Furthermore, given the rate of extinctions in the rails, it is disappointing that there is not more information on fossil rails.

An admirable aspect of this book is the attention it draws to our utter lack of understanding of rails, particularly of their social behaviour. Just flicking through the pages, it is easy to see that there are pages of information on some species, whilst others are limited to less than a page. For example, information on the White-striped Forest Rail *Rallina leucospila* is seriously deficient; there is little or no information on the plumage of downy young, movements,

habitat, food, habits, social behaviour or breeding season. This is in stark contrast to the description of the previous species, the Chestnut Rail *Rallina rubra*, which occupies nearly three pages. Thus, *Rails* makes the gaps, or chasms, in the current knowledge of rallid biology and ecology absolutely clear.

At first glance, *Rails* is a wonderful new handbook, which contributes much to the study and enjoyment of birds generally and rails specifically. This is still true to some degree after several re-readings. However, clear presentation of text and accurate illustrations are the most important aspects of a work that is designed as a guide and handbook, and *Rails* does not always achieve this. On the other hand, it undoubtedly draws attention to the paucity of biological information we have for many members of this fascinating family. If this handbook can encourage more people to take an interest in rallid biology, then perhaps all else can be forgiven.

Reference

Ripley, S.D. 1977. *Rails of the World*. M.F. Feheley Publishers Ltd., Toronto.

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