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CSIRO Publishing  
PO Box 1139 (150 Oxford St)  
Collingwood, Vic. 3066, Australia

Telephone: 61 3 9662 7622

Fax: 61 3 9662 7611

Email: [emu@publish.csiro.au](mailto:emu@publish.csiro.au)



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## OWLS: A GUIDE TO THE OWLS OF THE WORLD

by Claus König, Friedhelm Weick and Jan-Hendrik Becking, Illustrated by Friedhelm Weick

1999. Pica Press and Yale University Press. Pp 462, 64 colour plates. US\$ 35; £24.99.

This book is the latest in the Pica Press series covering specific taxonomic groups of birds. Owls are a particularly large and diverse group (about 200 species) and include many species about which little is known. The book is intended both as an identification guide and as a source of information on owl biology. There is also an accompanying double CD which unfortunately I have not heard, therefore, I will restrict my review to the book itself.

The book is divided into three main sections. The first section is a detailed overview of owls that covers their morphology and anatomy, topography, food, hunting, behaviour, breeding, vocalisations, and systematics and taxonomy. Although necessarily brief (19 pages), it is a highly informative summary of the features and lives of owls, highlighted by the large number of superb line drawings that help clarify each of the major points.

The next section is a chapter titled 'Molecular Evolution and Systematics of the Owl'. However, although it is short in length, it is highly technical and seems out of place in such a book, as I assume the majority of readers will not be familiar with molecular and phylogenetic methods. I would have preferred to see the information in the chapter presented in a more general format, more accessible to all readers.

Following the molecular chapter are two very short sections titled 'How to Study Owls' and 'Conservation'. Then follows the main part of the book - the systematic section that includes specific accounts, maps and colour illustrations for all the owl species of the world. The classification of owls presented here is new and of great interest. Taxonomic decisions arrived at by the authors involved consideration of both molecular data and information on variation in vocalisations across populations. The Biological Species Concept of Ernst Mayr was applied when delineating species boundaries. Consequently, 212 species are recognised with other species in the process of being described.

The account for each species opens with a list of alternative English and scientific names (if any), and a list of names in other languages. The main part is divided into sections on identification, vocalisations, distribution, movements, habitat, description, measurements and weight, geographical variation, habits, food, breeding, status and conservation. The Identification section includes details of how to separate similar sympatric taxa. Each account includes a sentence or two of 'Remarks' which mention points of interest or a lack of information and closes with a short list of references that are detailed in full in the Bibliography at the end of the

book. The colour plates illustrate typical adult specimens (usually both perched and in flight) and, for some species, immatures and/or juveniles. Many races are also shown.

This book looks good and reads well. I found the new information and taxonomic perspective provided for previously little known species such as the South American screech owls of particular interest. However, I did find the species accounts uneven in detail and accuracy. For some species the text and accompanying distribution map are very accurate, detailed and up-to-date, whereas for others there are obvious mistakes. I accept that for many, little information is available, but it seems that for some species, the appropriate background research has just not been done. Unfortunately, Australia is the region for which this criticism is most appropriate.

The increase in knowledge on the ecology and distribution of Australian owls over the past 10-12 years has been immense. A diversity of research papers has appeared, together with several books and at least two theses (Rod Kavanagh, Stephen Debus) which cover multiple species. However, none of these have been referenced in the accounts on Australian species (apart from Hollands 1991). The authors have relied heavily on previous books on owls of the world (e.g. Boyer & Hume 1991; Buron 1992), field guides (e.g. Simpson & Day 1989; Slater et al. 1989) and older papers (e.g. Fleay 1940, 1944). This approach has resulted in some flaws in the text and maps and produced a slightly 'behind-the-times' feel to the text on Australian species. Examples include the map for Lesser Sooty Owl (page 206) that shows its range extending from the McIlwraith Range in the north to Shoalwater Bay in the south (whereas it is found in a much smaller area between Shipton's Flat and Bluewater Range; compare with HANZAB Volume 4, page 903) and a statement that the Rufous Owl is an '...obviously endangered species...' (page 400). Both common and scientific names applied to some Australian mammals are also out of date (e.g. Common Brushtail Possum is called Brush Possum and Greater Glider is given the scientific name *Schoinobates volans*). The result is that the text loses its authority. For instance, the authors state that more research is needed on the biology of the Barking Owl and both species of Sooty Owl. This may still be the case, but the statement is made without recognizing the large research output on these species over the past 10 years.

Despite the uneven nature of the text, I still recommend this book to others interested in owls whether they are birders, researchers or armchair naturalists. It is a thorough and informative book on a fascinating group of birds that in many respects is very up-to-date. However, for those with a particular interest in Australian owls, I consider it to be of less value than HANZAB volume 4.

Chris Pavey,  
Zoology Institute of University of Munich