

LITERATURE

Edited by A. R. McEVEY

BOOKS

Birds in the Australian High Country edited by H. J. Frith, illustrated by Betty Temple Watts, 1969. Sydney: A. H. and A. W. Reed. Pp. 481, col. pl. (paintings) XXXIII + b. & w. pl., maps, and figs. 250 mm x 190 mm. \$A9.50.

A glimpse of the shape of things to come is always interesting. This handbook-like account of 'birds of the high country', as the work will probably and pleasingly be called regardless of the correct title, reveals with some impact the changing face of Australian ornithology.

It is the product of co-operation by professional CSIRO zoologists, some of whom might or might not claim to be amateur ornithologists, and one or two ornithologists who would not claim to be professionals—at which point the distinction is blurred and its fascination happily lost.

Originating with Dr R. Carrick, formerly of CSIRO, this work was carried to conclusion by Dr H. Frith, Chief of the Division of Wildlife Research. The contents, following a foreword by Dr F. N. Ratcliffe, provide introductory chapters dealing with The High Country (physiography), History, Bird Habitats, Bird Geography, Movements and Breeding Seasons. Laden with well-chosen comment and significant thought these are generally exemplary (but the early historical section lacks documentation) and constitute a concise introduction to the avifauna of south-eastern Australia and its study. Happier still, they show scientists enjoying their subject and revealing a shade of feeling in their writing without loss of accuracy; for example 'days of Saltbush' and spinifex that seems 'to extend for ever', Gang-gangs that 'grate their way over the city' and paddocks that 'become sprinkled with the red breasts of robins'.

The scope of the book is to summarize 'information on the birds in the south-eastern highlands' and to bring together 'data that have accumulated in the notebooks of the contributors'. The area covered is the land over 480 m (1,600 feet) between Goulburn, NSW, and Melbourne, illustrated on the endpaper maps. In the accounts of species the Australian range is always given, but local notes, referring regularly and understandably to the environs of Canberra, often remain silent on status elsewhere in the high country. Reference is given to literature relating to the Victorian High Plains and much information on regions of lower altitude is available in Victorian publications; but its collection for a future handbook is still to be done.

Taxonomic nomenclature and vernacular names are always controversial when an acceptable official checklist is not available. In such a predicament Dr Frith has held closely, though not completely, to the combined sequence of Wetmore and the list for Passerines of the Basel Conference. This, in turn, is close to the sequence adopted by H. T. Condon in 'A Handlist of the Birds of South Australia'. On seeing the treatment of such controversial groups as *Maluridae* (in which Dr Frith follows neither the Basel list nor Condon's) and the *Sittidae*, one is struck by the conservative attitude adopted. The present hiatus between an outworn official checklist of Australian birds and a forthcoming one is an opportunity, and in fact valuable, time for airing of diverse

opinions. Indeed the only choice at present lies between obsolete authority and unofficial novelty. One hopes that enjoyment of this enforced freedom, where taken, will be accompanied by awareness of its limitations and ephemerality. In this book there is no innovation, and because this book is not a taxonomic arena the approach adopted is perhaps the most appropriate. The scientific and vernacular names are those of the CSIRO publication, *An Index of Australian Bird Names*, a work to be reviewed in these columns.

The coloured plates by Mrs Temple Watts, commendably dated, are a feature of the book. Their size, clarity and the arrangement of birds on each plate are pleasing and nearly always meet the first demand of providing identification. Further than this, they achieve a distinctiveness arising from the artist's style which has the knack of capturing movement or the tension of impending movement by her treatment of the bird's eye and posture. The handling of some species, for example the ibises, spoonbills, parrots, babblers and woodswallows, is excellent; that of the cuckoos, honeyeaters and terns less so. The colour reproduction is generally good, but not of the cuckoos and kingfishers. The hint of habitat is more effective than the background found in some larger works of other illustrators. In some species the broad treatment, given presumably to allow for reduction, is a little overdone and detracts from crispness, but Mrs Temple Watts can capture the character of species and has made a contribution to Australian bird illustration.

The main section of the book, of course, is devoted to species each of which is treated under the headings Identification, Voice, Distribution, Habits, Breeding and Feeding. The descriptions are usefully detailed without minutiae, and emphasize key features printed in italics. These may not be the most apt in every case. For example, that for the Forest Bronzewing omits the marbling effect of the light dorsal feather-edges. The description of the Brush Bronzewing states that 'the female only differs in that the forehead is grey', omitting reference to the fact that it, and immature males, lack the rufous on the nape, the feature given as a field key. The identification mark given for the Forest Bronzewing is 'forehead, white or buff', but the male of the other species has a buff forehead. The differences between the two, marbled back and no rufous throat for the Forest Bronzewing, and plain back and rufous throat for the Brush Bronzewing, have not been clearly given.

The field information given under Habits is generally most useful and interesting; the breeding details, including measurements and description of eggs, clutch-size and, often, incubation period, are good, but also reveal the need for further information, as breeding seasons of cormorants for example, and under Feeding, the notes, while generally informative, show the great need for detailed analysis of the food of most of our birds. That the Bushlark feeds 'apparently on small insects' is surprising.

In any work of this kind the most careful checking of facts is required and Dr Frith no doubt hopes for attention to be drawn to possible improvements before the book moves to a second issue. In this spirit the following points are raised:

Hoary-headed Grebe. The distribution ought to include NT (Brunchilly Station).

Wedge-tailed Eagle. The range of egg colour as given seems too limited.

Brown Hawk. It is unfortunate that an illustration of the dark phase is not included beside the Black Falcon.

Swamp Harrier. Reference to its 'migratory' movement is unexplained.

Barking Owl. The habitat of this species includes old buildings.

Plain Wanderer. The plate shows the species standing on its toes as it is known to do occasionally. The text says only that it 'stands erect'.

Spur-winged Plover. Though this subspecies is described, its common name frustratingly does not occur in the index.

White-throated Nightjar. Because the Spotted Nightjar 'comes close in the west', it would have been useful to have given characters for the field identification of both species of nightjar. Both have white wing-spots and white throats; the Spotted gives the impression of a single large white spot on each wing seen in flight; the White-throated has one or more small white spots on the wings.

Spine-tailed Swift. The notes under habits do not mention 'out of phase' wing beats, or change of wing beat.

Skylark Pipit. The white outer tail shafts are mentioned for the latter, but not for the former, giving a false impression; both possess and show them.

Grey-crowned Babbler. It is surprisingly stated that this species runs, but does not hop; it bounces in a way that could only be called 'hopping'.

Brown Songlark. The song is surely given in song-flight more frequently than as described.

Restless Flycatcher. The buff throat-marking given as characteristic for the female is not supported by some specimens in collections.

Yellow-tufted Honeyeater. No mention is made of the form of *M. m. meltoni* of Suggan Buggan area; surely a distinctive 'high country' bird?

Bell Miner. No reason is given for the omission of this species.

Tree Sparrow. The statement that both sexes resemble those of the House Sparrow is confusing, even though a description follows. It is not made clear that in this species the sexes are similar to each other.

Woodswallows. Subject to needs of space the peculiar powder-down found in these distinctive birds could have been mentioned.

The Glossary is a valuable appendix. There is much to commend the inclusion of the normal meaning of a word before giving the special meaning used in the book. This is done with 'lanceolate' and 'filamented' but not, for example, with 'cryptic' or 'disyllabic'. On aspects of English again, the definition given of 'polygynous' is that for the noun 'polygyny', and under 'subspecies', the taxonomist 'distinguishes' rather than 'identifies'. On matters of scientific accuracy: 'adaptation' is defined as if applicable to conformation only, 'hackles' as 'throat feathers' whereas they are specialized neck feathers, those of the throat being throat hackles, 'tarsus' is not 'strictly the metatarsus', but strictly, the 'tarso-metatarsus', 'tibia' the 'tibio-tarsus', and finally 'vertebrates', surely, are back-

boned animals rather than 'animals with an internal skelton', even though they possess the latter?

One of the most important aspects of the work is that although we have had State books, and State and regional handlists and booklets, this is the first substantial illustrated work for a region of Australia, akin to the many county and regional books in British ornithology, and representing a significant advance in the literature of Australian ornithology.

Dr Frith is to be congratulated for seeing the book through to its publication. A carefully checked second edition will be very welcome. Nevertheless the reviewer uses this one frequently and before other references.

A. R. McE.

An Aerial Survey of Inland Western Australia by S. J. J. F. Davies, July 1969. CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research Technical Memorandum No. 1. Pp. 27 + figs. 1-11. 258 x 210 mm. (Treated for review as a book.) This interesting paper documents methods and results of an aerial survey to determine whether emus were more common in settled or unsettled territory. The opportunity was also taken to record all other birds and mammals seen. It is always a great problem to know how to deal with vast numbers of observations on a transect of many miles, and few people have attempted it. McEvey and Middleton (Emu 68: 161-212) did so for the birds and vegetation between Perth and Adelaide, but they produced no simple clear picture. The method of summarizing the observations in figures in the present paper shows one at once where the bird was seen with good information on habitat. It is hoped this paper will be the basis of further surveys so that comparisons can be made and some of the correlations between animals, vegetation and terrain confirmed. If fruiting Mulga *Acacia aneura* can be accepted as a good indicator of recent rain, this would be very valuable for observers visiting these areas.

The distance birds are from water partly depends on whether they are seed-eaters or not. All seed-eaters must drink and probably do so at least twice a day. When visiting the East Granites, 19 km east of The Granites on 10 April 1965, I noted that Budgerygahs and Zebra Finches were seen at once, indicating that water was probably close. A water-hole was found between two rocks, which gave total shade except for a few minutes when the sun was directly overhead. The birds were drinking here. Thus seed-eating birds, unless obviously travelling, usually indicate that water is not far away. Twenty-five or thirty km represent only an hour's flying time or less for a small finch. The African Red-billed Weaver Finch *Quelea quelea* may sometimes travel at least this distance to roost every night. Again depending on weather, green grass is not necessarily a favoured area for seed-eaters, because the seeds of the plants may have germinated, and the new plants may not have flowered and set seeds.

One could perhaps argue on several small points, but access to the detailed notes of the survey would probably clarify these. In any case this paper gives full details on how the survey was done and illustrates various problems which are worth further investigation.

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