LITERATURE

Edited by A. R. McEvey

SPECIAL REVIEW

Australian Warblers, by Arnold R. McGill, 1970. Melbourne: Bird Observers Club. Pp. 147, col. pll. frontispiece + xi. 185 x 120 mm. Price from The Bird Observers Club $4.10 posted. Clubs ordering 25 copies or more receive 10% discount.

There may come a time in the life of a field ornithologist when he feels the need to specialize, to test and increase his powers of discernment by tackling a group of birds whose species offer appalling difficulties of identification. At this point he may leave the fold altogether to become a wader-watcher or he may embark upon the one true study of ornithology, which, as everyone knows, is warblers. Mr McGill, to the great good fortune of Australian ornithologists, has followed the latter course.

Mr McGill's book has been eagerly awaited, and we now see that it was worth waiting for. Compiled basically as a field-guide, it treats the eighty-three species considered under the headings: Brief Description, Field Identification, Distribution, Habitat, Voice, Breeding and General Remarks. As Mr McGill says, no attempt has been made to designate acceptable subspecies. Although this obviates much comment of a subjective nature, it does mean that if subspecies are strongly differentiated one only is figured and described, as unfortunately happens with *Acanthiza iredalei* and the *Amytornis textilis-purnelli* group (see below).

The coloured figures by Rex Davies are variable in artistic merit, though basically sound. Most of them are adequately accurate, but others, for example some *Gerygone* species on plate X, are so inaccurate in their colours that one suspects trouble with the blocks. The distribution maps are of a precision rarely encountered in popular works, though a very few, detailed hereafter, are inaccurate. Two points about the map at the beginning and end of the book may be noted: the Macdonnell Ranges are placed too far west and the King River too far east.

In the introduction Mr McGill discusses the various taxonomic treatments this group has endured, and wisely refrains from aligning himself with any one. The present trend, however, with which I am in sympathy, is towards recognition of the chats as a separate family, the Ephthianuridae, and segregation of *Malurus, Stipiturus, Amytornis* and certain New Guinean genera to form the family Maluridae. The author's retention as species of one or two forms, relegated by some workers to subspecific rank (e.g. *Malurus assimilis* and *M. lamberti*), is not in slavish adherence to the 1926 Checklist but is an expression of doubt as to whether our knowledge justifies such lumping. This conservative approach is used to emphasize the problems of specialization involved and what would repay further study. The changes he has made among common names, mostly in favour of earlier or alternative names, such as White-tailed Warbler for Western Warbler and Slate-backed Thornbill for Robust-billed Thornbill, are eminently sensible.

As an avowed fellow warbler-student, I should like here to discuss some of the book's finer points, and hope that such comments may be of value in the preparation of the inevitable second edition of *Australian Warblers*.

Mr McGill writes that *Cisticola juncidis normani* Mathews was described from a specimen collected at Fitzroy Vale, Norman River. Lynes in his revision of the genus (suppl. to Ibis, 1930), however, listed seventeen specimens in Mathews's collection from the Norman River *and* from Fitzroy Vale, the latter locality being on the Fitzroy River in eastern Queensland. *Cisticola* means not 'plant-inhabiting', but '*Cistus*-inhabiting', *Cistus* being a genus of rock-rose.

Under *Eremiornis carteri*, the Spinifexbird, Mr McGill writes 'still considered a rare species and has been found only in isolated localities, indicating either a vanishing species or recent ecological changes'. I have listed (S. Aust. Orn. 25: 121) sixteen localities in which this species has recently been found in the southern two-thirds of the Northern Territory and have since recorded three more.

Following Keast's revision of the grass wrens, *Amytornis*, Mr McGill treats *purnelli* (Dusky Grass Wren) as a race of *textilis* (Western Grass Wren). In a paper in preparation I consider *purnelli* (with the recently-described race *ballarae* from the Mount Isa district) to be a full species on morphological and ecological grounds. *Amytornis purnelli* inhabits *Triodia*-clad rocky hillsides whereas the habitat of *A. textilis*, saltbush and other thicket-growth on plains, is similar to that of the much more closely-related *A. modestus*, the Thick-billed Grass Wren. Contrary to the range shown on Mr McGill's map, *A. textilis* and *A. purnelli* are not in contact, but if they were then one would expect their ecological differences to keep them apart, as happens between *A. purnelli* and *A. modestus* in central Australia. The species depicted on plate II, (Fig. 6) as '*A. textilis*' is *A. purnelli*.

Discussing the Grey Grass Wren, *A. barbatus*, Mr McGill writes: 'The discovery of this distinctive grass-wren in 1967 . . . in an area where no representative of *Amytornis* had been previously observed'. In notes following the original description of this species, Favaloro and McEvey (1968, Mem. natn. Mus. Vic. 28) state that Favaloro first observed grass wrens in the area (the Bulloorine of north-western New South Wales) in 1942. Mr Favaloro had earlier mentioned this sighting to Dr Keast, who in his revision tentatively referred it to *A. modestus*. Also Mr G. Ragless has informed me that Dr Chenery saw a grass wren in cane-grass in the area in the early 1920s (1922, S. Aust. Orn. 6).

Mr McGill's use of the term 'cane-grass' in remarks on habitats of grass wrens is rather loose; with respect to *A. barbatus* the cane-grass is *Eragrostis australasica* (Steud.) C. E. Hubbard, and with respect to *A. goyderi* and the central Australian populations of *A. modestus*, it is *Zygochloa paradoxa* (R. Br.) S. T. Blake. A knowledge of the distribution of these two grasses may be of great help in the locating of further areas inhabited by these grass wrens. *A. modestus*, incidentally, has not been recorded in central Australia, i.e. southern part of the Northern Territory, since 1923.

While on the subject of grass wrens I take the opportunity of pointing out that only *two* specimens of *A.*

goyderi were sent by Waterhouse to Gould for description. It would therefore appear that Mr K. Hindwood (1946, Rec. Aust. Mus. 21) is incorrect in attributing any type-status to the third specimen in the Australian Museum.

In *Malurus, callainus* and *splendens* are treated as separate species, without reference to the action of Serventy and Whittell, who, in the latest edition of *Birds of Western Australia*, regard the latter as a race of the former because intermediate specimens have been collected in Western Australia. The Variegated Wren *M. lamberti* and the Purple-backed Wren *M. assimilis* are also kept apart, and emphasis is thus placed on the need for critical study of these two forms in areas of possible contact.

The figure and description of the Little Scrub Wren *Sericornis beccarii* apply only to the race *minimus* of northern Cape York Peninsula. The race *dubius* of the southern part of the Peninsula has the facial pattern obscured by a heavy suffusion of cinnamon, and the underparts similarly suffused (Parker, Emu 70: 69–72). *Sericornis maculatus, S. frontalis* and S. *humilis* are retained as separate species, a course of action again underlining the need for critical study in areas of approach and putative overlap. Mr McGill postulates breeding sympatry of *S. frontalis* and *S. humilis* on Flinders Island, but adduces no evidence other than that 'specimens of each have been secured there'. In a recent paper, however, Mr R. Green (Rec. Queen Vict. Mus. 34: 16–17) accepts only the form *humilis* for Flinders Island.

Sericornis keri is included as a full species following Galbraith and Parker (Emu 69: 212–232) and is called by the author the Atherton Scrub Wren.

In *Acanthiza*, the treatment of *A. apicalis*, the Broad-tailed Thornbill, and *A. pusilla*, the Brown Thornbill, as separate species is a most welcome piece of common sense. The real problem lies in the interrelations of the forms within *A. apicalis*. Mr McGill states that birds found near Tanami are a clearly distinguishable subspecies, the Tanami Tit *A. tanami*, of Mathews. Mr Disney, however (Emu 69: 237–8) has placed *tanami* in the synonymy of *A. apicalis whitlocki*, a conclusion which my independent studies fully confirm. During recent field-work I have found also that the Tanami populations of *A. apicalis* are not isolated but continuous with those farther south.

Acanthiza katherina, the Mountain Thornbill, is separated from *A. pusilla* as a full species, following McKean and Hitchcock (Emu 69: 113).

The amateur ornithologist has never been treated to a clear exposition of the differences between the three accepted subspecies of *Acanthiza iredalei, iredalei* ('Slender-billed Thornbill'), *hedleyi* ('Dark Thornbill') and *rosinae* ('Samphire Thornbill'). Indeed, he has been sadly misled by Cayley. On plate XIX of *What Bird Is That?* Figure 10 is not the 'Samphire Thornbill *Acanthiza iredalei*' as stated on the opposite page (= *A. i. iredalei*) but apparently *A. i. rosinae*, and Figure 11 of the same plate is not the 'Dark Thornbill *Acanthiza hedleyi*' (= *A. i. hedleyi* + *A. i. rosinae*) because it seems to have the rump-patch of *A. i. iredalei*. One may suspect a transposition of the key numbers 10 and 11, and that a specimen of *rosinae* has been used to do duty for both *rosinae* and *hedleyi*. Any sightings identified by reference to these two figures should be discarded. This unfortunate state of affairs is unremarked by Mr McGill, who depicts for *A. iredalei* what appears to be the western and central nominate race.

In *Gerygone, flavida*, the Fairy Warbler, is recognized as a full species and not as a race of *palpebrosa*, the Black-throated Warbler, though possibly the records of *flavida* from within the range of *palpebrosa* (all sight-records?) are referable to female-plumaged *palpebrosa*. Again the need for further investigation is indicated.

A much-appreciated move is the treatment of *Gerygone tenebrosa*, the Dusky Warbler, as a full species and not as a race of *G. magnirostris*, the Large-billed Warbler. The documentation of the range of the former, east to Port Keats, NT, is of interest because the species has not previously been recorded from the NT, and details would be welcome. A field-character of use in distinguishing *G. tenebrosa* from the similar *G. levigaster*, the Mangrove Warbler, is the pale-yellow iris of the former, a point not mentioned in the book.

The northern boundary of the range of *Gerygone fusca*, the White-tailed Warbler, is farther north than shown: Mungi Rockhole, Fitzroy River (Meise 1931, Novit. zool. (36)); Inningarra Range, Tanami Desert, 20° 45′ S, 129° 38′ E (specimen collected by me on 3 August 1970); Sedan and Normanton, Q. (specimens in the American Museum of Natural History, examined). Within *Gerygone mouki* (including *richmondi*), the Brown Warbler, Mr McGill has not mentioned or mapped the population of the Mackay district described by Meise (1931) as *Gerygone igata amalia*.

Epthianura is correctly spelt *Ephthianura*, as pointed out by Condon (1968). Mr McGill, having mentioned this in his introduction, reverts to the incorrect spelling for the rest of the book. As I stated earlier, the prevailing trend at present is to regard the chats *Ephthianura* and *Ashbyia* as forming the family Ephthianuridae, of uncertain relations. For what they are worth, I briefly record my own observations on *E. tricolor*, the Crimson Chat, i.e. that it has a quadrifid fimbriate tongue and that, in the Northern Territory, it sometimes feeds at ground-level from nectar-bearing flowers of *Brachysema chambersii*.

To those observers in whom the operation of intelligence is free from the trammels of reason, *Australian Warblers* will prove a source of endless excitement, and one awaits with dreadful certainty the appearance of a note proclaiming the sighting of the Atherton Scrub Wren from a southern garden. For the majority of readers, who possess an awareness of the distinction between the probable and the possible, the book will prove a valuable tool, and the reviewer welcomes it with every good wish.

S.A.P.

BOOKS

Peregrine Falcon Populations Their Biology and Decline, edited by Joseph J. Hickey, 1969. Madison, Milwaukee, and London: University of Wisconsin Press. Pp. xxii + 596, b and w pll. frontispiece + 60, 245 x 170 mm. $US10 or £4.75.

About twenty years ago it was observed that populations of Peregrine Falcons were declining in Europe and North America. Since then the Peregrine has disappeared entirely from the eastern United States and has become very rare in other areas of North America and Europe that are densely populated by humans. Other species of eagle and hawk, such as the Bald Eagle and Osprey in North America and the Sparrowhawk in Europe have also suffered a sharp decline. This book records the proceedings of an international conference held in 1965, attended by most workers engaged in long-term

studies of birds of prey and by other specialists. The conference examined aspects of the ecology of the Peregrine and, to a lesser extent, of other hawks, and the possible effects on the birds of factors such as parasites, diseases, deliberate human persecution and pesticides. About fifty original contributions are included, and important discussions, in which further new information is produced, are reported in full. Some contributions have supplementary data bringing the story up to 1968.

It is an inescapable conclusion that the catastrophic decline in population is directly attributable to the wholesale use of persistent chlorinated hydrocarbon insecticides such as DDT and dieldrin. Residues of insecticide are concentrated in certain tissues of the organisms that ingest them. The raptors are at the end of a food chain and thus accumulate larger amounts of insecticides and are more likely to suffer toxic effects than are other kinds of birds. The population decline is not because of direct poisoning, but because the birds fail to breed successfully. The chlorinated hydrocarbons interfere with production of sex hormones and supply of calcium at the time of egg-formation, depress breeding potential and cause the production of thin-shelled fragile eggs that break easily. Readers, who would like to know more about this, should read the very interesting essay, 'Pesticides and the reproduction of birds', by David B. Peakall (Scientific American 222: 73–78, April 1970), in which the effects of insecticides on the reproductive physiology of birds are described.

The introductory chapter is a world-wide survey of the life history and population literature of the Peregrine. There is very little information from Australia, which is not surprising because the bird has been little studied in this country. The book is illustrated by a fine series of portraits, nesting sites, and nests, including two nest sites in Australia.

So far Australia has apparently escaped disastrous reductions in its fauna because of insecticides, although residues have been found in a variety of animals and the warning is clear. This excellent book should be required reading for all concerned with conservation and especially for authorities responsible for the administration of faunal protection and for agricultural research and production.

J.H.C.

Some Garden Birds of South-East Australia by Tess Kloot and Ellen M. McCulloch, illustrated by Rex Davies, 1970. Sydney: Collins. Pp. 138, col. pll. (paintings) + b. & w. pll. (scraper-board). 225 x 15 mm. $2.50.

Can Pacific Gulls and Black-faced Cormorants be described as garden birds? The question exercised my mind as I read through this book, and I had to conclude, albeit reluctantly, that the word 'Garden' in the title is misleading.

As an introduction to city-birds in south-eastern Australia, however, the book is impressive. About seventy species are described and illustrated, and passing reference is made to twenty more. The book is intended as a guide to identification of those birds commonly seen in the main cities from Sydney to Adelaide. The authors hold themselves responsible for the choice of species, and they offer no explanation why such widespread and well-known birds as the Skylark, Pipit, Flame Robin and a few others have been left out.

Each species is fully described. There is information on its plumage in relation to sex and age, its typical behaviour, the composition and situation of the nest, the clutch-size and egg-colour, and its call-notes and song. A welcome new feature is the suggestions for further study. Concerning the Rufous Whistler, for example, it is stated: 'Records suggest that the first nest may not be used, a second one being constructed for egg-laying. Careful notes could show if this is a normal pattern, or simply if desertion occurs more readily early in the breeding season'. Hints like this should be an incentive to bird-watchers who have not yet progressed beyond listing of birds.

The inclusion of excerpts from poems about a few species is another innovation. Dyed-in-the-wool ornithologists may frown at this feminine touch, but the poetry does make pleasant reading, and it fits in well with the book's style and structure, providing light contrast to the purely informative prose. I found it delightful.

Supplementary sections deal briefly with such matters as the keeping of records, bird-banding and attracting birds. There is a list of trees and shrubs attractive to birds and a recipe for making 'nectar' to lure honeyeaters.

The sketches by Rex Davies are of uneven quality, but the best are well done; the birds are depicted accurately in natural settings. Only six are in colour. The remainder are scraper-board reproductions, and for some species identification would be difficult.

Both authors are amateur ornithologists and busy housewives. They are to be congratulated for producing a bird-guide of this standard which, one feels, will be successful enough to encourage them to publish more.

A.H.D'A.

Common Australian Birds of Towns & Gardens by Graeme Chapman, 1970. Melbourne: Lansdowne Press. Pp. 143, col. pll. 63, b & w pll. 44, figs. 4, 230 x 155 mm. $A2.95.

The first edition of this book, published in paperback as *Common City Birds,* was reviewed in Emu 70: 39. The present publication includes twenty-nine additional black and white photographs, but is otherwise identical with the earlier work apart from its larger format, hard binding, altered title and the substitution on the cover of a Kookaburra for a Flame Robin. It is satisfying to see this attractive and useful book appearing in a more durable format, although the publisher's technique of referring to the earlier version as 'an abridged edition' is unusual and the change of title is undesirably misleading.

R.A.B.

SHORTER NOTICES

For simplicity the names of authors of papers are accompanied by initials only.

Australasian publications

Species

SHANAHAN, J. J. 1969. The Buffy Faced Pygmy Parrot. Aust. Av. 23: 120–122.

Between eighty and one hundred Pygmy Parrots *Micropsitta pusio beccarii* captured in Northern Papua were offered a wide variety of food in aviaries with other parrots on varied diets, but had to be released because they did not eat. Mosses were torn to shreds but uneaten, and termites ignored. Nestlings could not be hand-reared. The species nests and roosts in arboreal termite nests. Other details of interest are included in the paper.

H.J.