

# REVIEWS

Edited by G. W. JOHNSTONE

## BOOKS

### A review of four books about the Corvidae Ian Rowley

Ten years ago when I was trying to write up my work on the Australian corvids I had to delve deep and search far and wide in several languages to obtain comparative material. It never rains but it pours and now within the space of three years no less than four books on the crow family (the Corvidae) have been published. Two of these, those by Goodwin and Coombs, are excellent, thorough works, worthy of a place on any ornithologist's bookshelf. The third suffers so badly by comparison that I could not recommend its purchase to anyone. This must be sad for the author; for, in the absence of the first two competitors, its shortcomings might be outweighed but I doubt whether even then I could give it a kind review. The fourth book is quite different.

**Crows of the World** by Derek Goodwin, 1976. London: British Museum (Natural History) and St Lucia, Qld: Univ. of Queensland Press. Pp vi + 354, col. pll 3, many b. & w. drawings (by Robert Gillmor) and maps. 225 x 284 mm. \$A25.00 (£15.00).

Apart from deliberately setting out to confuse the librarians I cannot for the life of me understand why *Crows of the World* has been published in both London and Brisbane. The London publication appeared in 1976; the Queensland one claims on page iv to be simultaneously published but was not; for, it bears the date 1977. This makes it hard to know which date to use in a reference list. However, apart from the dates, the different dust-jackets, the publisher's name on the title page and more verbiage on page iv, both books were printed in Great Britain and are identical. Perhaps this dual midwifery contributed to the long delay between the completion of the manuscript and the appearance of the book; this prolonged parturition does mean that, although dated 1976 or 1977, it does not include any references to work published after 1972, a long delay in a field that has seen a lot of work meanwhile. But these are my only whinges and the latter tinged by personal pique that my six papers on Australian corvids published in 1973 are not referred to; through no fault of Goodwin or me and, without meaning to preen, that does lessen the value of the book to Australian readers!

*Crows of the World* is a monumental work covering 116 species and although we in Australia can see only five (all in one genus) there are many very strikingly beautiful corvids close to the north of us in Asia. To the many birds who travel widely these days Goodwin's enthusiastic writings may have considerable appeal.

As one would expect in a publication from the British Museum this is a scholarly book. The first three chapters cover the general themes of Nomenclature, Adaptive Radiation and Plumage, all subjects for which the Corvidae provide excellent examples to illustrate the complexity and variation possible in a closely related group of animals. These chapters last for only eighteen pages and really serve as an extended introduction. Chapter 4 on Behaviour lasts for forty pages and is packed with interesting information subdivided into twenty-one sections, many of which carry their own technical reference list: Feeding habits; Food storage; Drinking, bathing, sunning, anting and preening; Sociability and flocking; Territory; Communal roosting; Individual distance; Dominance and social rank; Species recognition and imprinting; Some aspects of the pair-bond; Threat and fighting; Defensive threat display; Self-assertive display; Quivering and submissive display;

Juvenile-type begging; Displacement movements and redirected aggression; Reactions to the sick or injured; Individual differences; Nesting and parental care; Voice and Vocal mimicry; Escape, mobbing and some other anti-predator behaviour.

Chapter 5 lasts for 285 pages and catalogues the Crow family. Goodwin follows Peters's Check-list (Blake and Vaurie 1962) in his classification and treats the 116 species in thirteen broad groupings: typical crows, crows, nutcrackers, typical and azure-winged magpies, blue, green and Whitehead's magpies, treebies and the Black Jay, typical jays, grey jays, American jays, ground jays, *Zavattariornis*, Piapiac and the Crested Jay. Each species is dealt with in as much detail as was available under the headings, Description, Distribution and habitat, Feeding and general habits, Nesting, Voice and Display. Most species are depicted by drawings and twenty-two are shown in three colour plates, all by Robert Gillmor. Distribution maps are frequent and the reference lists at the end of each species are helpful to those who want more detail.

This is a magnificent example of dedicated work that must have taken years to compile; the result is a monograph that ought to grace the bookshelves of most ornithologists because the group as a whole exemplifies so many aspects of our science.

**The Crows: A Study of the Corvids of Europe** by Franklin Coombs, 1978. London: Batsford. Pp 255, col. pll 4, b. & w. pll 13, b. & w. drawings 51, maps. 160 x 240 mm. £7.95.

During the 1960s when I was working on crows I read and re-read the papers written by Franklin Coombs about ravens, rooks and jackdaws, always with enjoyment and ease. In the present book Coombs has presented a mass of information from many sources on the eleven European corvids (*Corvus* 4 spp; *Pyrrhocorax* 2 spp; *Nucifraga*; *Pica*; *Cyanopica*; *Garululus*; *Perisoreus*) each of which rates a chapter to itself.

The presentation of these data in a readily available form was no easy task; for, the original work was hidden from most of us in the form of an unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Charles), Government reports (Houston) and long papers in Finnish (Tenovuo), German (Gwinner and Wittenberg), Swedish (Blomgren and Lindgren) and Polish (Kulszycki, Pinowski). To unearth, translate, analyse and compare all these data and then to summarize lengthy descriptions and enthusiastic wanderings accurately is a massive task. Perhaps the author can be forgiven a sometimes stilted style in his search for scientific exactitude; certainly it is a joy when occasionally he bursts forth with the personal pronoun and his own data! This is not meant as carping criticism but in the hope that the corvid enthusiast will be tempted to read more of Coombs's own work (1960, *Ibis* 102: 394-419; 1961, *Bird Study* 8: 32-37, 55-70), which I feel is inadequately presented in this book, probably from modesty and because space was limited. For example, the classic paper on photoperiodism and breeding cycles by (the late Jock) Marshall and Coombs (1957, *Proc. zool. Soc. Lond.* 128: 545-589) is dismissed in a paragraph (p. 84) and I am left with my appetite tantalizingly whetted where he says about jackdaw territory (p. 120) '... I had six occupied nest boxes made from tea chests on the outside of a hide in a rookery ...' but we hear little more.

The amount of information available varies from species to species and in consequence so does the length of each chapter. As far as possible the same headings are used for each species:

Description; Distribution; Posture and Voice; Territory, Pair Formation; Nest-site selection; Nest Building; Eggs, Incubation and Young; Roosting and Flocking; Food; Predators; Parasites, Morbidity and Mortality. The sections on Posture are a particular delight since Coombs, besides being a GP is an accomplished artist; many of the drawings are from his own notebooks but thanks to the generosity of other authors (Gwinner, Goodwin and Charles) he has been able to present comparable line drawings from different species, many of which, being black, are inadequately illustrated by photography. Also, thanks to Messrs Batsford, the drawings are large enough to show detail. This is the section of the book that will interest Australian readers most; for, many of the displays are probably homologous to those of our own ravens and crows. Likewise, the section on territory, roosting and flocking provides fascinating comparisons with our own species. Fortunately they are the species Coombs knows best and for which there is most information. Chapters 3 to 6 (Raven, Crow, Rook and Jackdaw) occupy 109 pages but the other seven corvids (chapters 7-13) take sixty-nine. There is a chapter on the Great Spotted Cuckoo that parasitizes various corvids in Europe, which I found disappointing; but then chapters on cuckoos generally are, because data are lacking.

Chapter 15 is entitled Some Comparisons and I would like to have seen it much enlarged, calling on the wealth of data in the early chapters. In fact I would have preferred an enlarged Chapter 15 at the expense of the last chapter, which documents an historically interesting find: a volume of notes written by a patient who was set to rook-watching as occupational therapy during convalescence in the middle of the last century; it adds little to science. Better still I would have liked to have heard more of those tea-chest-dwelling jackdaws!

This is a book that is a joy to read and even to look at. My criticisms are few and mainly nit-picking but the maps are un-numbered! They are not included in the series of figures; that on page 103 does not state its source (which was Coombs, 1961, *op. cit.*) and the text on the page opposite does not refer to the figure but only to the reference.

**Crows, Jays, Ravens and their relatives** by Sylvia Bruce Wilmore, 1977. London: David and Charles per ANZ Book Co. Pp 208, figs, maps and photos 50. 144 x 222 mm. \$A17.50 (£5.95).

I do not like to disparage a book but this is not a good one and I cannot recommend its purchase or reading. First, most people who are contemplating a book want to know something about the author. The publisher's blurb does nothing to assuage my curiosity and the author's acknowledgements tell little more than that her husband was enthusiastic. Mrs Wilmore obviously is very interested in Corvidae and the book must represent many many hours of devoted work but the taxonomic groupings (genus, species and subspecies) are repeatedly confused, e.g.

p. 52 line 25 '... the other pure species is *G. g. persaturatus* ...'

p. 66, line 35 'The genus *Cyanopica* has eight known subspecies ...'

p. 66, line 38 'the genus *Urocissa* ... has three species: *U. ornata*, *U. caerulea*, and *U. flavirostris* ...'

**An Annotated Checklist of the Birds of South Australia. Part One: Emus to Spoonbills** by S. A. Parker, H. J. Eckert, G. B. Ragless, J. B. Cox and N. C. H. Reid, 1979. Adelaide: The South Aust. Orn. Ass. Pp 56, maps 4, 248 x 183 mm. \$A3.50.

South Australia, more than any other Australian State, has been blessed with a string of annotated lists of the birds of its territory over the last few decades, all produced by the South Australian Ornithological Association; together they form a fitting tribute to the industry of the oldest ornithological society in Australia. First was Terrill and Rix's *Birds of South Australia: their distribution and habitat* (1950), to which H. T. Condon later made a number of mainly taxonomic adjustments

and then on p. 70 line 2 we find *Urocissa erythrorhyncha* and on p. 71, line 30, *Urocissae* (sic) *magnirostris*.

These just got me so confused that I ceased to read the book with any enjoyment, a pity because I am sure it is not all bad.

Mrs Wilmore lists her bibliography at the end of the book but she very seldom refers to the sources of the material that she has used for various chapters, as is customary and necessary to give credibility, specially if people do not know who you are. For example, Figures 39, 40 and 45 are borrowed from Rowley (1970, CSIRO Wildl. Res. 15: 27-72). Also, this list is more notable for its omissions than inclusions; on the British scene there is no mention of Coombs (see above), Dunnet and Patterson (rooks in Scotland) nor most of Goodwin's papers, all of which have been published in widely available journals. Needless to say, the less available work of Charles and Houston are not referred to (see review of Coombs), nor the classic work of Gwinner, nor the less well-known works of Tenovuo, Wittenberg, Blomgren, Lindgren, Kulczycki or Pinowski. Back to papers in the English language, those of Skead (1952, Ibis 94: 434-451) on *Corvus capensis* in South Africa, Emlen (1942, Bird Banding 13: 143-154) and Bent (1946, Bull. US Natn. Mus. No. 191) on corvids in the USA are sad omissions in a review work.

There is little, if anything, in this book that will not be found better documented in Goodwin's book. How dreadful! I may meet Mrs Wilmore one day; I hope I can still run adequately fast!

**Ravens, Crows, Magpies and Jays** by Tony Angell, 1978. Seattle: Univ. Washington Press. Pp 112, b. & w. ills c. 80. 225 x 286 mm. £10.50/\$US14.95.

To be quite honest I was prepared to dislike this book, which, by chance, was the fourth of my quartet on corvids for review. I opened it and was quickly won over by the beautiful black and white drawings, no mean feat for a critic who has 'lived and thought' crows for ten years! Then, wonder of wonders, the text drew me in as well, specially when it took me into the private world of Angell's own emotions. The eighteen corvids that occur in the USA represent the family far better than our five Australian members, which are all in the one genus. Angell first introduces each of his eighteen characters and then describes those aspects of corvid behaviour that have most fascinated him. It is no academic ethological text but a book to read for pleasure.

A really well produced book, it is expensive for 100 odd pages but the publisher has not skimmed the size of page and the drawings fit both page and text. For once, I can understand (or think I can) the reference to 'Design — Audrey Meyer' on the frontispiece; for, the book as a whole is a fine example of what a combination of talents can achieve.

The birds that Angell writes about will be strangers to most Australians and I cannot encourage people other than the worst crow-addicts to dig deep and buy a copy. But pester your librarian and borrow a copy, I am sure you will enjoy the experience and find that your appreciation of the much maligned *Corvus* spp is enhanced. I might even let you look at mine!

(1951, S. Aust. Orn. 20: 26-68). Then in 1962 Condon produced his first *Handlist of the Birds of South Australia*, a rather patchy effort that introduced distributional errors and misconceptions of the habitat of many species. These shortcomings were somewhat overcome in later editions (1968, 1969), which elaborated aspects of classification and nomenclature in great detail and stressed status and protection.

The present list bids fair to fulfil the adage of 'last out, best dressed'. It is the first of four parts and covers the Dromaiidae to Plataleidae. If less expansive in its treatment of species than Condon's, it is more accurate, precise and meticulous. Indeed, in accuracy of detail, it has no peer among other regional lists

of Australian birds except perhaps Storr's *List of Queensland Birds* (1973), which itself is one of the great contributions to the geography of Australian birds during recent decades.

The new South Australian list is modelled on the format used by Storr. Parker *et al.* could well have opted for Storr's neutral title, 'List', instead of the more specific 'Checklist', a term which is singularly unspecific and misleading in the way that it is often used. Species are listed binominally, with the regionally occurring subspecies given in a subscript. In the interests of stability, English names follow the recommendations of the RAOU (Emu 77, Suppl.) with former names in parenthesis. This sensible and practical procedure could be used to advantage by the authors of other lists, manuals, guides and handbooks of Australian birds.

Information about each species is given under the headings of range, status and taxonomy. Here the novel use (at least in Australia) of multiple authors reaps its own reward because their joint knowledge combines to make the accounts of range and status the most authoritative and perceptive of any Australian regional list. Some might find the detail too much but none can complain about omissions and misapprehensions, so complete are the accounts. A comprehensive gazetteer helps. The taxonomy is simply and correctly up to date rather than innovative. Almost wherever opinion is divided, Parker has summarized the most recent sources of information and indicated those that have been followed.

Distributions are described district by district and it is here that I have my main quibble. In lists such as this, regions or districts ought to have zoogeographical bases, an amalgam of geography and habitats. It is interesting to compare the way in which Condon (in 1969) and Parker *et al.* have tackled the problem. Condon based his districts on the distribution of habitat, much of which was inaccurately defined and straddled important zoogeographical boundaries such as the Eyrean

Barrier. In contrast, Parker *et al.* use geography. Yet though their districts are more practical than Condon's and recognize some biogeographical divisions, including the Eyrean Barrier, they are still far from perfect. By the criteria used to separate the South-East, Ninety-Mile Desert and Murray Mallee (correctly, in my view), the Flinders Ranges ought to have been divided into southern and northern sections separated by the Willochra Plain; the Simpson Desert with its sandhill fauna ought to have been separated from the shrub gibber of the Lake Eyre Basin; the mallee-covered Barton sandhills would have better been kept with Eyre Peninsula than placed with the mulga of the Great Victoria Desert, which in turn could have been combined with the North-West; and the Everard-Musgrave ranges, sheltering both distinctive and relic species such as *Calyptrorhynchus magnificus*, *Amytornis purnelli*, *Chlamydera maculata* and *Strepera versicolor*, would have best been treated on their own. I stress these points because with three parts to go and all the land birds ahead of them, Parker *et al.* still have the opportunity to improve their divisions.

The present list adds nine species for South Australia not recorded by Condon, not counting unconfirmed records, and a number of subspecies. Most, but not all, have been found since 1969.

Layout and type-setting are particularly clean and clear and on a quick read through I found no errors, reflecting thorough reading of the proofs.

But with three parts to go, the compilers of this list have a considerable task ahead of them. They have set themselves a high standard and sound guidelines and I look forward to the completion of a work that promises to stand as the encyclopaedic compendium on the status of South Australian birds for many years.

Richard Schodde

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