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PITTAS, BROADBILLS AND ASITIES

by Frank Lambert, illustrated by

Martin Woodcock

1996. Pica Press, East Sussex. Pp. 271, colour plates 24, line drawings, maps 51, 175 x 245 mm, £26 (hard cover).

Frank Lambert is a founding member of the Oriental Bird Club, an organisation whose sphere of interest encompasses the geographical range of many of the species included in this publication. He has field experience with more than half the relevant species in both the Oriental and African regions. Martin Woodcock was the *British Birds*' 'Bird Illustrator of the Year' in 1983 and is well known for his illustrations, especially in regard to the continuing series of publications, the *Birds of Africa*.

This book is yet another dedicated to a specific family or group of families, rather than a geographical region. Inevitably, there is, and will continue to be, overlap with other current and future publications, but this does not decrease the relevance or worth of this work. The format complies with what is now a comparatively standardised layout for books of this nature. Initially there is an overview of the families covered, including phylogenetic relationships, classification, biogeographical history and distribution, ecology, movements, and conservation. The 24 plates follow, illustrating all 51 species recognised by the author, and are succeeded by the systematic section. A substantial bibliography and well structured index complete the book. A glossary of terms is included but is inadequate, an unfortunate yet common feature, when a glossary is present at all, of books of this ilk.

The systematic section examines the distribution, field identification, voice, geographical variation, habitat, status, movements, diet, habits, breeding, taxonomy, description and measurements of each species. In addition to the bibliography, it would be preferable to have a reference list at the conclusion of each species account. Maps for each species are included in this text,

though as this book does deal with field identification it would perhaps be advantageous for the maps to be adjacent to the relevant plate. The maps display present, former and possible distributions and, where appropriate, breeding, passage and wintering ranges. The plates are not overly crowded, allowing for adequate size, and hence definition, of each individual illustrated. This does reduce the degree of direct comparison between similar species but as this is not truly a field guide this is of minor concern. At the very least the colour illustrations show an individual in adult plumage, with many plates including examples of some of the following: males and females, immatures, juveniles, subspecies with significant plumage variation, breeding and non-breeding birds, or birds in flight.

The species sharing a plate have been well chosen for comparative purposes. In addition to the plates there are 18 black and white line illustrations, not including the seemingly obligatory topography of a typically representative species or composite individual. These line drawings feature nest structures, behavioural postures and some morphological comparisons. Rather than being critical of a lack of such illustrations for all species, I would consider what is provided to be a pleasant bonus, both as a source of information and as an aesthetic diversion from the visual monotony of the systematic section.

The choice of such decorative families has enabled the author and illustrator to present a most attractive yet technically useful book. The considerable overlap in distribution of many of the species covered make this a worthwhile companion to field guides, especially in southern Asia. I am a devotee of books such as this and, notwithstanding my minor complaints, would heartily recommend its acquisition to any person interested in publications which fill a niche somewhere between field guides and the more substantial, and more expensive, monographs.

Terry Reis
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