

CSIRO Publishing

Emu



Volume 99, 1999
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Birds Australia

Published by CSIRO Publishing
for the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union

www.publish.csiro.au/journals/emu

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BIRDS OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT by Richard Grimmet, Carole Inskipp and Tim Inskipp

1998. *Christopher Helm, London. Pp 888, 153 colour plates, 6 figures, 250 x 174 mm, \$160.00 plus \$8.00 postage and packaging (hard cover).*

At long last the global bird community has a comprehensive field guide to the birds of the Indian subcontinent (Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives Islands). Despite its disconcerting size and weight, I was only too happy to lug this around with me in the field during a recent month long exploration of north-west India. What a joy it was to find that what I saw in the field related so well to these generally accurate and attractive illustrations. And all in one book. Until now we have managed with various tomes, largely by those doyens of Indian ornithology, Salim Ali and Dillon Ripley. In addition, there has been a recent plethora of photographic guides to the Indian region but nothing to compare to this present book.

This book accepts 1295 species for the Indian subcontinent including the recently described Nepal Wren Babbler *Pnoepyga immaculata*. The species accounts are impressively detailed identification primers but as such this leaves little room for much else. Sections on voice, habits, habitat, breeding, distribution and status are frustratingly brief. In fairness, given the already substantial dimensions of the book, any additional information would have made carriage and use in the field impractical. Nevertheless, I'm always greedy for more information and it is clear that all three authors know the region and its birds well. Thus, it is disappointing that the authors are unable to fully expand on their knowledge of the subcontinent's avifauna. In view of the space constraints, the list of references following each species account appears a little gratuitous and could easily have been omitted.

A short, sometimes almost perfunctory, paragraph introduces each family or major taxonomic group (as defined by Sibley & Ahlquist (1990)). The sequence, taxonomy, scientific and English names follow that of An Annotated Checklist of the Birds of the Oriental Region ('Oriental Checklist' hereafter) (Inskipp et al. 1996). The perennial, thorny subject of English names is largely obviated by the adoption of the names presented in the Oriental Checklist. Nevertheless, there will inevitably be some dissenters.

The species descriptions are impressively detailed and provide an inestimable reference source both in the

field and library. Nonetheless, some groups continue to present considerable field identification problems. For example, discussion of the *Aquila* eagles, a major problem group in the subcontinent and extraliminally, only leaves one more confused than illuminated. Not only is this frustrating at the basic identification level, but it seriously impairs one's ability to gather unambiguous data and thus understand the conservation status of such endangered species as, for example, Greater Spotted Eagle *A. clanga*. Nevertheless, the identification accounts are generally accurate and sufficiently detailed to allow separation in the field, under ideal conditions, including such difficult groups as *Cettia*, *Bradypterus*, *Locustella* and *Phylloscopus* warblers. However, worn, bleached individuals of almost any species in early spring seen in bright sunlight (exactly the timing and conditions most birders tend to encounter these species in India) will always remain difficult to identify and these difficulties are not addressed here. Species accounts vary in length with those for Blyth's Reed and in particular Booted Warblers being notably detailed as befits these tricky-to-identify species.

The introduction acknowledges the limitations of comparing voice descriptions from different sources. Despite this, I was disappointed with the Voice section. This was a major area that needed good descriptions referenced to locale. Surely there are enough sound recordings now commercially available or on birders tape files that the authors could have made comparable transcriptions of vocalisations of subcontinent birds. To have done so would have added substantially to our knowledge of the region's birds. Perhaps more importantly, it would have added considerably to the value of the book as an identification tool.

The sections on habits and habitat are so cursory and brief that they rarely add much value to the book's content. The sections on breeding also suffer from lack of space; nevertheless, they are a valuable inclusion. The section on distribution and status is very helpful and essential to understanding the overall picture in the various countries that make up the subcontinent. Again, the lack of space precludes as much information as would be desirable. The inclusion of accompanying black and white maps for all species complements this section well — for resident breeding species. Unfortunately, for all other categories, the maps are of virtually no value. Their small size, coupled with the faintness of the printing, requires one to literally view the maps under a good electric light with a magnifying glass — thus making their usefulness in the field non-existent.

Without doubt the constraints of space in attempting to deal with nearly 1300 species in as much detail as this team has done creates its own problems. Nonetheless, I believe it is essential to include extralimital ranges for each species in a book such as this. Perhaps most importantly, this would provide a bio-geographical context for each species in addition to helping users understand the distributional significance of a given species presence in the subcontinent.

The 153 plates, all in colour, provide a mouth-watering insight into why so many servants of the British Raj became enraptured by the birds of the subcontinent. In more recent times, it is not hard to see why the subcontinent, in particular India, continues to attract large numbers of visiting birders either as independent travellers or as a member of the burgeoning growth of professional bird tours. Quite simply, the birds of this region are stunning and this book's plates in general do them great justice. I especially like the work of Daniel Cole. His plates 1-6, which illustrate such spectacular species as tragopans and both Himalayan and Sclater's Monals, do those species proud. Cole's selection of backgrounds greatly complement his individual illustrations, an improvement over Plates 52-58 painted on a rather harsh, stark, chalky-white background. Other plates I found especially pleasing included Jan Wilczur's ducks, Alan Harris's flycatchers and Craig Robson's evocative depictions of the 30 laughingthrushes and 99 babblers (including parrotbills). Perhaps the only plates I was legitimately disappointed with were those depicting skuas, gulls and terns. That artist's irritating style is horribly jarring by comparison to the other plates in this book.

The disappointingly spartan introductory section encompasses 19 pages and includes five large maps and a page with a diagram depicting descriptive parts of a bird. The preliminary introduction of five paragraphs occupies one third of the page and the rest is left blank! (The introductory paragraphs also include the first of several typos.) Surely, given the apparent preoccupation with saving space, any such blank pages could have been better used, such as expanding upon the rich history of ornithology on the subcontinent, a discussion of continental biogeography or a description of the region's vegetation communities.

The black and white map of the subcontinent's original forest cover was fascinating to see but then so is watching a cobra about to strike! Too bad that the map of current forest cover could not have been placed on the opposing page so as to facilitate easy comparison.

The almost complete deforestation of Bangladesh and the broad swath of deforestation across the north Indo-Gangetic Plain leaves one aghast. Notwithstanding, India still continues to confound and any birding trip quickly emphasises the remarkable 'birdiness' of the subcontinent. Birds are literally everywhere, including in the midst of much squalor and pollution: a tribute to the all pervading Hindu philosophy of respecting all life. Nowhere in the Oriental region but India can one still encounter little-known bodies of water teeming with large, highly edible birds such as Spot-billed Pelicans, Painted Storks, Bar-headed Geese and hundreds sometimes thousands of migrant Palearctic waterfowl. I thank Peter Kennerley for his comments on this review.

References

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