

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

Book review

Edited by D. Jones

10.1071/MU99035B_BR

PITTAS OF THE WORLD: A MONOGRAPH ON THE PITTA FAMILY

by Johannes Erritzoe and Helga Boulet Erritzoe

1998. *The Lutterworth Press, Cambridge, UK. Pp. 207, 32 colour plates, numerous text figures, distribution maps, tables, appendices, bibliography & index, 305 mm x 215 mm, £30, AUS\$110 (hard cover).*

This work was produced by individuals financially supporting themselves, their science and art. Both author and artist are well established and known in Denmark their first book in 1993 brought them to world attention. Although the authors are not observers of pittas in their natural habitats, it is clear from innumerable references to the literature, correspondents and personal communications that they have been extremely conscientious and in seeking published and unpublished pitta information. This is combined with their own meticulous work in the museum, library and study/studio to result in a comprehensive work well beyond the scope imposed upon Lambert & Woodcock (1996), the most recent book to feature pittas.

The typeface throughout the Erritzoes' large volume is small, emphasising just how much text it contains. The Family introduction is a tightly presented 18 page section with headings: Classification, The Origins of Pittas, Family Description, Sexual Dimorphism, Sex Ratio, Body Mass Changes in Adults, Colour Patterns, Dusky Streaks, Distribution and Sympatric Species, Geographical Variation, Movements and Migration, Habitat, Behaviour, Vocalisations, Food and Feeding Behaviour, Breeding Biology, Longevity and Mortality, Moulting and Abnormalities, Captivity, Parasites and Diseases, Museum Diagnosis, Hybridisation, Status, and Conservation.

Taxonomy and vernacular names used are conservative, based upon Sibley & Monroe (1990). Thirty species are accepted, as opposed to the 32 of Lambert & Woodcock (1996); *P. dohertyi* treated as a subspecies of *P. erthagaster* and *P. ussheri* a subspecies of *P. gra-*

natina. Subspecies are largely those of Mayr (1979) but with some departures. The term 'megaspecies' (of Amadon & Short (1976)) is used to indicate a subspecies approaching, but not at, the threshold of species status.

The Species accounts (pp. 32-166) are tight and data rich and include French, German, Italian and alternative English vernacular names followed by: Description; Dusky and Glossy Streaks; Allied Species; Distribution; Recent Records (after 1975); Movements; Habitat; Behaviour; Vocalisation; Food and Feeding Behaviour; Breeding Biology; Moulting; Captivity; General Notes; Parasites and Diseases; Museum Diagnosis; Hybridisation; Status and Conservation; References (author/year only); and Colour Plate. Capitalised key words assists quick location of subjects. Type specimens are documented. Plumage descriptions are made more useful by reference to Smithe's (1981) naturalists' colour key. Published photographs of live birds are cited at the end of the Description text.

Biometrics are tabulated with sample sizes, means, standard deviations and ranges for species and subspecies. Outline maps show breeding and non-breeding ranges by shaded areas and/or numbered locations.

The significance of better avicultural practices is emphasised by observations made of the Fairy Pitta *P. nympha* maintained in Denmark by the authors, particularly their systematic observation and recording of moult and behaviour. Particular attention is given to the status and conservation of the group.

Following the species accounts are a key to synonyms and new proposed names, a glossary and the appendices, museum acronyms, pitta species by island and their status, world inventory of pitta egg and nest collections, pitta skeletons and fluid preserved specimens, contributors to the book, bibliography and index.

The colour plates, at the back of the book, are from water colour paintings, rather than comparative identification plates (for which Lambert & Woodcock (1996) is more useful). Thirty show the nominate form, both sexes when dimorphic, and juvenile/immature plumage where museum specimens permitted. Plate 31 illustrates the nine 'megaspecies' defined by the authors as well as an egg of each of 21 species. Plate 32 usefully shows an adult male (not specified in the caption) of all 30 species (contrary to the caption which fails to include *P. iris*). The page reference on each colour plate refers the reader to the start of the appropriate species account.

It would have been helpful to have the name of each species on the top of each pertinent page of the book

rather than the pointless 'Pittas of the World' at the bottom of every text page.

On page 14 it is stated that the list of taxa to follow — as recognised by Elliot (1893) — involves three genera, 18 subgenera and 47 species but the list in fact includes only two genera, 17 subgenera and 43 species. I was a little disappointed with the section dealing with the origin of the group which consists of only two brief paragraphs expressing the view that present radiation of the group suggests it originated in the Oriental Region (possibly so but not necessarily indicated by present radiation), that Africa was reached at an early stage, that 'dusky streaks' (considered unique to the family) were probably a feature of ancestral birds that, thus, occupied relatively open habitats and stating there are no fossil pittas. A brief review and discussion of past and present views of what bird groups are most closely related to the pittas, presently found under Classification, might have more appropriately appeared under The Origin of Pittas. If for no other reason than that Gould (1880–1) included it in his monograph of the Pittidae, brief mention might have been made of the Lesser Melampitta *Melampitta lugubris* of New Guinea, notwithstanding that it has long been understood to be unrelated to pittas.

The trinomial after the species account heading Description seems pointless because all involve the nominate subspecies which could have been stated in the Plan of the book. Reference to published photographs is a useful idea, of value to bird artists among others, but is near impossible to do comprehensively. For example, I am aware of numerous published photographs of live Australasian pittas not cited in this book. Published photographs may contain valuable biological information as, for example, one of a Noisy Pitta by myself showing a bird bringing a bill full of leeches to its brood (a food apparently unrecorded for any pitta in this monograph).

A recent common practice is the listing of author/year literature citations that may or may not appear in the species account at the end of each account. This seems a waste of space as all such citations within the

species account text are thus merely repeated. Those that do not appear in the species account text cannot usually be related to what they specifically refer to and, in any event, appear in full in the exhaustive bibliography of more than 1300 references.

I noted numerous small inconsistencies and typographical errors that, while not detracting significantly from this fine book, should have been avoided. Because the authors' first language is Danish and their freely-acknowledged need for help with English, the publisher must accept responsibility for most of these errors. In fairness to its authors and readers, the publisher should have had the text more professionally edited by a scientific/ornithological copy editor. This does not diminish the authors' achievements.

The publisher has produced this book at a reasonable price, the latter possibly in part due to sponsorship by the Carlsberg Foundation of Copenhagen. I recommend it as good value for money.

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