

# Book reviews

Edited by P. Dann

## WADING BIRDS OF THE WORLD by Eric and Richard Soothill

1989. Blandford Press; London. Pp. xvii + 317, colour plates 98, b&w sketches and maps 96, 156 x 233 mm. \$26.95.

The term 'wading birds' is used to describe various groups of birds. In Australia many birders use this term for birds of the order Charadriiformes (sandpipers, stints, snipes, avocets, stilts, etc). Other birders use the term, large wading birds, for those of the orders Ciconiiformes or Ardeiformes (storks, ibises, spoonbills, herons, egrets, etc.) and the Gruiformes (cranes). In this book all of these groups birds are included because it was the authors' intention to cover 'all those birds which actually do wade at some time of the year, especially in their search for food...'.

In the introduction the authors attempt to describe their decisions for excluding some species from the book, but unfortunately the authors get lost in a description of the habits of some unusual species; interesting stuff but not very disciplined organisation. They don't mention the gulls and others that I would include using their definitions. And that set the tone for me about the whole book, but back to this later.

In all, 313 species are covered, with information on some or all of the following: description, characteristics and behaviour, habitat, food, voice, display, breeding and distribution (this is also mapped). Useful colour plates (that are often poorly reproduced) and black and white drawings are used to visual advantage throughout. A small bibliography (which seems not to have been updated since the 1982 edition) and indices of common and scientific names are provided. The book has a soft cover which on the review copy is already showing moderate wear.

This is not a book for the serious student. At best only preliminary information is provided and unfortunately much of the information seems to have been drawn from general works and simply isn't very interesting. Quite a lot of the information is also incorrect or incomplete. The book would be of little use to novice birders and a big problem for southern hemisphere learners is that the book concentrates on species from the other half of the globe. There are several better books that have been thoroughly researched that each cover some of the species.

The book seems to have been prepared with not much enthusiasm for these birds. I am afraid that I have even less enthusiasm for this book. Better treatments of

some of these groups can be found in *The Herons of the World* [Hancock, J. & Elliott, H. (1978) London Editions; London] and *Shorebirds in Australia* [Lane, B.A. (1987) Nelson; Melbourne], and others that are currently in preparation.

Kim W. Lowe

## THREATENED BIRDS OF AUSTRALIA — AN ANNOTATED LIST edited by Joost Brouwer and Stephen Garnett

1990. RAOU and Australian National Parks & Wildlife Service; Melbourne. Pp. 178, 150 x 214 mm. \$11.50 from RAOU headquarters, plus postage.

There are quite a few books dealing with endangered Australian birds, ranging from glossy money-grubbing efforts to some I'm quite fond of. In none though, have the species named as 'endangered' been scrupulously selected using objective criteria and all the expert advice available. There has been nothing local to compare with the IUCN/ICBP Red Data Books, which have been important abroad in directing all-too-scarce conservation funds to species that need them most.

*Threatened Birds of Australia* (TBA) is different. It is essentially a Red Data Book for Australian birds, albeit with different publishers and a light grey cover. The internationally accepted definitions of status used in the Red Data Books have been followed — extinct (seven species in Australia), endangered (eight), vulnerable (seven), rare (17), indeterminate (11 — belonging to one of the above categories but it is not clear which) and insufficiently known (nine). 'Threatened' is a term used to describe a bird fitting into any of these categories. There isn't space in this review to describe the selection procedures but they look good. Over 80 ornithologists were involved in compiling and refereeing the book; as far as I can tell, no important references or referees have been missed. Above all, the decisions made in assigning status are accountable. Reasoning is summarised and references are used correctly (something of an innovation in Australian endangered birds literature). Much of the data used in the decision-making are unpublished — a necessary evil if state-of-the-art information is to be presented. Addresses of all referees and compilers are given so that readers who need more information will know whom to contact.

A concise introduction describes the procedures followed in writing the accounts and assigning status to

each species. Most of the book (140 pages) is given to accounts about the 52 threatened species in Australia, each ranging from one to four pages long. Accounts start with a paragraph summarising status, the rest of the account presenting the information on which the decision was made. It is done under the following headings: **Distribution.** This section sometimes lists places I haven't heard of — I would have found a gazetteer or map a useful addition. **Population.** Care is taken to describe the uncertainty associated with population estimates. **Habitat and threats.** The habitat descriptions cover the general topography of preferred areas, vegetation structure and the dominant plant species. I found them readily understandable, which perhaps means that they aren't detailed enough! I don't know whether more detailed floristic descriptions would have been possible or relevant. The threats are usually the run-of-the mill acts of vandalism seen world-wide; habitat clearance is the greatest problem, island species are being hard-hit by introduced animals, and so on. An Australian flavour is given to the section by the frequent mention of changed fire regimes as a probable threat. **Conservation measures taken.** Includes a summary of research done and a description of land-use practices in the species range. **Conservation measures proposed.** Suggestions made seem practical and constructive outlines for future work; there is nearly always a call for more research. Lord Howe Woodhen *Tricholimnas sylvestris*, Orange-bellied Parrot *Neophema chrysogaster* and Noisy Scrub-bird *Atrichornis clamosus* are the only species for which a continuation of existing conservation measures is considered sufficient. **Remarks** are sometimes given on other aspects, such as breeding success in captivity and taxonomic status. Each account closes with references and a list of the compilers and referees.

The remaining thirty-odd pages are devoted to three appendices. The first is similar to the main body of the book, but the four species covered (White-throated Grasswren *Amytornis woodwardi*, Black Grasswren *A. housei*, Rufous Bristlebird *Dasyornis broadbenti* and Eungella Honeyeater *Lichenostomus hindwoodi*) were found to be secure. The second appendix is rather interesting. It lists discrepancies between this book and the more 'official' list prepared by the Council of Nature Conservation Ministers (CONCOM), which has been

used by government as a guideline to species needing work. Sixteen birds listed as endangered by CONCOM are not considered threatened in TBA; 37 listed by TBA are not covered by CONCOM. The authors of TBA have tactfully put this down to new information and slight differences in taxonomic coverage and selection criteria. I would be less charitable. Hopefully, TBA will encourage CONCOM to exercise more care when they revise their list.

TBA only covers full species from Australia which are threatened on a global basis — fair enough, for these require more urgent attention and attempts to incorporate subspecies would have delayed publication considerably. However, to maintain genetic diversity all recognisable geographical forms have to be protected. Appendix 3 lists, without annotation, other taxa of Australian birds (mostly subspecies) that are or may be threatened. Funds raised from the sale of this book go towards producing a second, in which status of such birds will be covered.

One thing that should have been stressed in this book is that there is more to conservation than the preservation of threatened species. For instance, TBA lists a disturbing number of threatened seed-eaters from tropical Australia. The reasons for their decline are not well understood — is it just coincidence or are there common causal factors to blame? If so, they should be found before other wildlife in the area is seriously affected. This may be a case where an integrated approach to research will produce faster results than studies directed to a single species. Perhaps the editors thought this sort of point was so obvious that it didn't need to be made to ornithologists. It will not be so clear to other readers, and should have had a mention.

With so many people involved in the production of this book, it could easily have become a patchy, disorganised mess. The editors have done an admirably tight job to produce a coherent and readable book that will enlighten professional and layman alike. Perhaps its greatest flaw is that it is underpriced! Given that it is a handsome, well-bound paperback and that proceeds from its sales go into another worthwhile project, the publishers would have been justified in asking far more per copy.

Danny Rogers