

# Book reviews

Edited by P. Dann

## **ROBERTS' BIRDS OF SOUTHERN AFRICA**

by Austin Roberts

6th edn. revised by Gordon Lindsay Maclean,

illustrated by Kenneth Newman and

Geoff Lockwood

1993. *The Trustees of the John Voelker Bird Book Fund, Cape Town. Pp. xxx + 871, colour plates 177, colour maps 3, 220 x 160 mm. R70 (VAT included).*

It would be quite wrong to consider the sixth edition of 'Roberts' merely a reprint of a very popular bird book. The changes and additions to this volume reflect the enormous advances in southern African ornithology during the past decade and nowhere else can one find a more detailed source of information on the subject in one volume.

Historical background to the book precedes the Introduction which features family tables that provide at a glance the taxonomic grouping and habitat types of the major bird forms. Each aspect of the book is introduced under numbered bold headings, 12 in all, dealing with the subjects in the species descriptions, ending with brief comments on field equipment and the identification keys. These dichotomous keys are set out in 29 groups and are printed on blue paper, making them very easy to locate.

The three maps explain the tri-colour system used to illustrate distribution and breeding status for each species; rainfall zones in seven colours; and habitat types in ten colours. Only the first map shows political boundaries but the extensive river systems that originally determined these boundaries are shown on each map and are readily recognised.

The colour plates are excellent and show features and postures that will aid identification. New plates

have been added to better illustrate warblers and flycatchers, and four plates depict birds new to the region. The overcrowding on some plates, e.g. raptors, simply provides an insight into the tremendous wealth of species within certain families.

Species descriptions provide the S.A.O.S. number; colloquial name in up to 11 languages (eight of them African); scientific name; measurements of length, wing, tail, tarsus, culmen and weight, with examples of sexual dimorphism where they are known; bare parts; identification; voice, most of them with at least one sonagram, some with up to four; distribution and a map that is coloured to separate residents from breeding and non-breeding migrants; status; habitat; habits; food; and breeding, with six sub-sections treating season, nest description, clutch size, egg description and size, incubation and fledging. The plate number on which each species occurs is prominently displayed and there is also an abbreviated reference to important works on particular species or families of birds. There is a useful glossary and an extensive index of names. It would have been handy if the family indexes had been printed on the endpapers, as advertised on the dust jacket, but most users would find ways to cope with this oversight.

This book has been the best source of information on the birds of southern Africa from the time it first appeared in 1940. It has since evolved, improving and expanding to become a handbook of primary importance to African ornithology. This edition is concisely written, accurate, informative and expertly illustrated. It will be satisfying to all who are or would be knowledgeable about birdlife in the region, deserving a place in the collection of any serious ornithologist.

Perry de Rebeira