

Book reviews

BIRDS AND BIRD LORE OF BOUGAINVILLE AND THE NORTH SOLOMONS

By Don Hadden

2004. Published by Dove Publications, Alderley, Australia. 312 pp., 199 colour photographs, 25 colour plates. Paperback, \$A55.00, ISBN 0-9590257-5-8.

This book covers Bougainville and associated islands that together constitute the North Solomons Province of Papua New Guinea, and not the Solomon Islands proper. A referendum on the political future of the province is due in 2010, when independence is expected to be an option. This follows the ravages of a 1989–1997 civil war sparked by a dispute over the Panguna Copper Mine. Bougainville was essentially off-limits during that period and it is only since then that a resolute few bird watchers have visited.

Don Hadden was a teacher at Panguna during 1976–1980 and again as a volunteer at Arawa during 1999–2002, making important discoveries in this part of Melanesia. His most significant finds were the Bougainville Thicket-warbler, *Cichlornis llaneae*, named in honour of his wife Llana, and the first specimens of the mysterious Odedi bird (via John Toroura) in 2000, tentatively assigned to *Cettia* but yet to be formally described. The rediscovery of Woodford's Rail, once considered possibly extinct, was another Hadden find. Consequently he was in a unique position to write this book, which is an improvement upon his long out-of-print 1981 *Birds of the North Solomons* (Wau Ecology Institute, Handbook No. 8), by revising information therein and in being written as a resource for the people of North Solomons Province.

The text is pitched at about grade 10 upper secondary level and technical terms are avoided. Basically it is a hybrid photographic-cum-field guide plus a repository of local bird names and bird folk tales. The latter, somewhat anthropological, sections are aimed at indigenous users and are of limited interest to others. Synthesizing these disparate elements was no mean task and it makes the book unlike other guides, but then it is aimed at the local market. Fostering a local interest in native birds is a useful aim, with significant conservation implications, and it is intended that copies will be made available in local schools.

The book is of shiny paper, as are others by this publisher, and is a sensible size for field use although the softback format is perhaps a concern regarding its robustness in such humid areas. The endpapers feature excellent maps of the area covered, a key feature inexplicably lacking in some field guides; typeface and layout are readable and effective. Introductory sections outline the aims of the book, and it is nice to see a long list of local people prominent in the *Acknowledgements*. A thumbnail sketch of the North Solomons Province details physical geography, climate and

vegetation, and there is an interesting summary of ornithological exploration in the area including offshore atolls.

The brief *Watching birds on Bougainville* text is valuable, directing readers to key areas and discussing local protocols, though I would have expected some caveats about existing no-go rebel zones (mainly around the Panguna mine site). It is foolhardy to ignore these, and any visitors should be aware of all risks, even if the situation is improving. I was interested to learn that Mt Balbi now provides access to high altitude species, not seen by birders for years. A *Where birds are found* section is useful, as the significance of altitude in bird distributions quickly becomes evident, and the glittering ornithological prizes of Bougainville are listed. These include: the Moustached Kingfisher, unseen for 65 years save one sighting; Black-faced Pitta, unseen since 1938; White-eyed Starling, unseen since 1985; Mayr's Swiftlet, known from one local specimen; and the mysterious Imitator Goshawk. There are also two seabird prizes: Heinroth's Shearwater, reported to nest in the Crown Prince Range; and the enigmatic Beck's Petrel, known from a single 1928 North Solomon waters specimen. Visitors will be keen to seek the five Bougainville endemic species – the eponymous thicket-warbler, monarch, crow, honeyeater, and Odedi bird (seen only by John Toroura). There is also a raft of restricted range Solomon Islands species. Each species is briefly described, with subspecific assignment and sections on habitat, voice, general information, status and distribution. Some claims about status seem optimistic. For instance I have not found the Bougainville Monarch to be common, as indicated, but uncommon and localised at best, and the Black and White (Solomon's Pied) Monarch and Scarlet-naped Honeyeater are surprisingly described as being common.

Fifteen colour plates by Peter Slater are most evocative and, while I wished for more, this publisher does specialise in photographic guides. Slater has provided some wonderful paintings, including those of Duchess Lorikeet, Crested Cuckoo-Dove, Pale Mountain Pigeon and Claret-breasted Fruit-Dove, Solomon's Cuckoo-shrikes and Melanesian Cuckoo-shrike. But does the adult Melanesian Cuckoo-shrike really have a dark eye here? Dana Gardner's painting of the Moustached Kingfisher is also striking, as are nine others by him, although some birds (e.g. Brown-winged Starlings) seem rather flat and lifeless. Some photographs are outstanding and are of poorly known species: good examples are Imitator Goshawk in the hand, Woodford's Rail, flying Sanford's Eagle, Fearful Owl, Solomon's Hawk-Owl (Boobook) and the distinctive Marbled Frogmouth race *inexpectatus*. In-hand shots of the Bougainville taxa of North Melanesian Thrush and Island Thrush and even a photo of the Odedi bird are also fascinating. Some darker photographs are of doubtful value, particularly some of habitats. Pictures of Mackinlay's Cuckoo-Dove, some swiftlets and Pacific Swallows taken from above have little value as aids

to identification. The location and photographer of pictures are provided. A few photographs have appeared in the seminal 1985 and 1990 *Birds of Papua New Guinea* by Brian Coates (Dove Publications, Alderley) and also serve well in the present context.

Bird families are introduced by an informative summary. Local people are urged to write to the author about new information on little known species, a refreshing grass roots approach that could prove rewarding. Taxonomy is conservative, in some cases out of date. I was surprised to see Clamorous (sic) Reed Warbler, *Acrocephalus stentoreus*, included, as this population has long been differentiated as *A. australis*, and the local taxon of what was Yellow-faced Myna, *Mino dumonti*, has been widely acknowledged as being Long-tailed Myna, *M. kreffti*, for some years. The local Cicadabird and Fan-tailed Cuckoo are other distinctive taxa, and the book highlights that the whole avifauna is in need of a taxonomic review in the light of contemporary genetic studies and species concepts. Haddon has mercifully coined few new English names but I was dismayed to find the unhelpful and confusing Hawk-Owl applied to the far more appropriate Boobook.

A useful checklist details the status of the 192 species reported on Bougainville, Buka, Nissan, Nuguria, the Carterets, Mortlock and Tasman Islands, including four regarded as unconfirmed. The author has done a fine job of collating obscure records, and has painstakingly tracked down early ones. It is interesting to note that the Common Myna population was just two birds at Arawa in 2002 and that the endemic race of Buff-bellied Mannikin, discovered by Haddon on Buka, may now be extinct, although a similar (perhaps the same) form occurs on New Ireland (pers. obs.).

The bibliography is thorough and represents a valuable key to the scant literature of the region. A short glossary and dictionary is provided for local readers. The index includes common and scientific names and functions well. Proof reading and editing are of high standard. Compared to the *Birds of the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu & New Caledonia* by Doughty *et al.* (1999, Helm, London), the present guide has a more detailed and accurate text and very good maps, although the plates might have been better grouped for ease of use.

The book is good value for money (except for local people living within a subsistence economy, but copies are being given away within the region) and the New Zealand Agency for International Development and Rio Tinto are to be congratulated for sponsoring this worthwhile publication. The book is an essential purchase for birders visiting the region and is a most welcome addition to the literature of a long-neglected avifauna. I wish it every success in its avowed aims of communicating about birds to the long-suffering people of North Solomons Province, happily now entering a positive phase of their history.

Phil Gregory

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MONITORING BIRD POPULATIONS USING MIST NETS

Edited by C. John Ralph and Erica H. Dunn

2004. Studies of Avian Biology No. 29. Published by the Cooper Ornithological Society. 211 pp., numerous data-based figures, maps, tables. Paperback, \$US23 (including shipping and handling), ISBN 0-943610-61-3.

This publication results from an October 1993 workshop 'The Use of Mist Nets to Monitor Bird Populations' with a primary focus on passerines. It has 46 authors, from the USA, UK, Canada, Germany and France. Papers have been re-evaluated and updated since the workshop and several were presented subsequent to it. Editing was completed in late 2003. The contents are:

Introduction: Use of mist nets as a tool for bird population monitoring.

Breeding season evaluations: Effects of mist-netting frequency on capture rates at Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) stations; Monitoring productivity with multiple mist-net stations; Influence of mist-netting intensity on demographic investigations of avian populations; Methodological considerations of the Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) Program; Current practices in the British Trust for Ornithology Constant Effort Sites scheme and comparisons of temporal changes in mist-net captures with changes in spot-mapping counts at the extensive scale; Relationships of juveniles captured in constant-effort netting with local abundance; Estimates of adult survival, capture probability and recapture probability: evaluating and validating constant-effort mist netting; Estimating adult survival rates from between-year recaptures in the British Trust for Ornithology Constant Effort Sites scheme.

Evaluation of mist netting outside the breeding season: A European example of standardized mist netting in population studies of birds; Determining productivity indices from age composition of migrants captured for banding: problems and possible solutions; An investigation of productivity indices derived from banding of fall migrants; Optimizing the allocation of count days in a migration monitoring program; Use of mist nets for monitoring landbird autumn population trends, and comparison with other methods; A comparison of three count methods for monitoring songbird abundance during spring migration: capture, census, and estimated totals; A comparison of constant-effort mist netting results at a coastal and inland New England site during migration; Mist netting trans-Gulf migrants at coastal stopover sites: the influence of spatial and temporal variability on capture data; Bird population studies in Puerto Rico using mist nets: general patterns and comparisons with point counts; Coping with mist-net capture-rate bias: canopy height and several extrinsic factors; Use of mist nets for study of neotropical bird communities.

General considerations: Some consequences of using counts of birds banded as indices to populations; On the use of capture-recapture models in mist-net studies; Effectiveness of informal banding training at three western Canadian banding stations.

Recommendations: Recommendations for the use of mist nets for inventory and monitoring of bird populations.

The *Literature cited* lists over 450 references, with an inevitably strong USA and European bias. Save two 1982 papers, about a New Guinea study by H. L. Bell, appearing in *Emu*, Australasian journals are not cited. Nevertheless, this publication clearly includes information highly pertinent

to biologists using mist nets, particularly bird banders. At its reasonable price, I would encourage all systematic bird banders to obtain a copy (from Cooper Ornithological Society, c/o Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology, 439 Calle San Pablo, Camarillo, CA 93010, USA).

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BIRDS OF THE WESTERN PALEARCTIC INTERACTIVE (BWPI)

2004. Published by BirdGuides, Shrewsbury, UK. Text for 953 species, 1,000+ sound recordings, 2,300+ video clips, 5,500+ illustrations. (Software developed by Skylark Associates. Original text and illustrations: Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.) £199.

This interactive DVD-ROM publication presents, in this format, the content of the monumental nine-volume work, *Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. The Birds of the Western Palearctic* (1977–1994); also subsequently published in an abridged, compact, two-volume edition. Reviews of Volumes 1, 2, and 4 appeared in *Emu* **78**, 244–245; **84**, 252–53 and **86**, 194, respectively, by the late and great Stephen Marchant, but no other volumes were reviewed in this journal.

As with most interactive CD-ROM and DVD-ROM products, the content available in the electronic version is much greater than for that in the ‘corresponding’ hardcopy book – yet it all comes in a smaller package and at a much lower up-front cost. This DVD contains a seriously impressive number of videos, sound recordings, photographs and diagrams, as well as the full, concise and ‘BWP update’, texts. These are all logically arranged and easy to find.

There is an advanced search facility, which gives fantastic control and enables you to search for specific pictures and videos as well as words or phrases in the text. Once found, texts are easily copied or printed. Details of references can be seen by simply clicking on the reference in the text.

In general the DVD is easy to navigate, though some aspects do take a little while to get used to. This is partly because of the many features. For example, you can compare two species relatively easily, but comparing photographs of multiple species is more complicated. Once you have the hang of it, however, the program is powerful and provides great control. A nice feature is that you can save collections of images to view again at a later date.

Installation was reasonably simple, but I did have to contact technical support to get past the first screen (entering the serial number)! Apparently a name longer than five letters needed to be entered.

A few other relatively minor gripes: there is no obvious way to print out photographs and diagrams; if a search takes

too long, there is no obvious way to interrupt it; sound and video recordings do not have any visual display of their length; it is not possible to see in advance which videos have sound; the text tends to appear in a small window with a scroll bar, though there is a ‘zoom’ control conveniently placed on the main toolbar; and the options for larger and smaller annotations do not seem to make any difference.

More details are available on the website: www.birdguides.com/bwpi.

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Protoavis Productions and Deakin University

FIELD GUIDE TO AUSTRALIAN BIRDS: COMPLETE COMPACT EDITION

By Michael Morcombe

2004. Published by Steve Parish Publishing, Brisbane, Australia. 384 pp., numerous colour illustrations, 770 maps. Paperback, \$A34.95, ISBN 174021559-1.

This is a condensed version of Morcombe’s larger guide of 2000. It contains much of the original text, illustrations and maps and appears not to have been revised or updated. A 68-page nests and eggs section and a 10-page section, *Birds of Australia’s Island Territories*, of the first edition are omitted. Attractively presented, this slender, fairly lightweight, pocket-sized book, should sell well. A page marker ribbon and a clear plastic protective cover are useful novel features.

A handy guide/index to families on the first page and on fold-in cover flaps are colour-coded to match tags on edges of relevant pages. A similar colour index inside the back cover is useful. However, the last three colour codes on the inside front cover do not correspond to relevant pages and families. Families are introduced by helpful boxed illustrations depicting all species, though with some inconsistency (e.g. the migratory wader box depicts only a selection of species). Oddly, some rare vagrants, e.g. Upland Sandpiper, are given pictorial preference over common species.

Layout differs from standard field guide format. Rather than plates on one page with text opposite, illustrations, text, and maps are combined on, usually, a third of a page. This is acceptable and probably works better than standard formats. However, further scrutiny of the guide’s content reveals major shortcomings. Quality of illustrations falls short of the well-executed ones in the three other Australian field guides, although size reduction in this compact edition has reduced the ‘scratchiness’ of those in the original one. Whereas some illustrations are reasonable, others do not depict typical stance and shape (i.e. ‘jizz’) – a basic requisite for any guide. A thornbill, gerygone, scrubwren, etc. should at least be recognisable as belonging to its respective genus, but many are not. Some honeyeaters, Bell Miner, bristlebirds, Latham’s Snipe, riflebirds, many owls, Wonga Pigeon, Feral

Pigeon and others look unnatural. The Striped Honeyeater is unrecognisable as such. Many birds appear too thin and elongated, one of the worst being the Yellow Wattlebird. Quail-thrushes have a large unnatural 'under-carriage'. Elongate white rectrices of a flying Buff-breasted Paradise-Kingfisher are depicted as fluttering soft plumes but should appear stiff and straight. The Australasian Bittern is given short legs contrary to the text 'legs quite long'.

Often, plumage markings are not precise and clean-cut, making it difficult to identify near-identical species. This is especially noticeable in groups such as waders where quality of illustrations along with untypical shape or pose makes it near impossible to separate some similar species. One wonders why many species are illustrated in flight: wing markings are often important for identification of seabirds and some waders but there is no value in depicting many passerines in flight when wing markings (typically lacking) are usually impossible to see. Flight illustrations should only be included if they aid identification.

Three shades of each colour are applied to distribution maps and, while a vague explanation of this is given in this edition, the original one states that the deepest hue is 'where the species has most often been recorded', intermediate hue is 'known and certain range – where it is generally accepted that the species does occur' and the palest hue 'few records, rare vagrant or previous range'. To determine these accurately would require enormous effort and resources and it is obvious that the author has in fact merely drawn two parallel lines around a species' focal range with no consideration of habitat, altitude and other factors influencing distribution. Not only is this misleading, it does not work, and the absurdity of it becomes obvious in habitat-specific species. The Southern Cassowary, which ventures to the edge of its rainforest habitat but never far from it, provides a good example as follows: according to this guide the area (medium hue) extending to 100 km W of the rainforest edge (into dry open tropical woodland and savannah) is 'known and certain range – where it is generally accepted that the species does occur' and the area extending a further 100 km W (~200 km W of the rainforest) has 'few records, [it being a] rare vagrant or previous range' or, according to this compact guide, 'fades away through a fringing zone where occasional vagrants have been observed'. Similarly, overall distribution of the Golden Bowerbird is shown as a ~250-km-wide strip extending inland from the coast far into dry woodland, well west of the Great Dividing Range. Its range is actually a strip of upland rainforest, generally above 900 m, that is mostly less than 4 km wide. Many other species are as poorly mapped. The method used for mapping accidental and vagrant records outside a species' range is also misleading. Where dots or arrows are normally used, the pale hue is continued from a bird's known range to the vagrant record site(s). Also most misleading are some scattered, usually single, records of vagrant species (e.g. of wagtails) indicated by a large area of medium hue, sometimes surrounded by a larger and paler one.

One wonders about the value of subspecies or races in a field guide when, often, the differences between them are so subtle they cannot be discerned in the field. The essence of a field guide is to enable identification of a species, by distinguishing it from similar ones. Further, indication of races in this guide is confusingly inconsistent. Although races are mostly each shown on the maps, two or more are sometimes shown as one and yet are detailed individually in the text (e.g. Orange-footed Scrubfowl, Australian Brush-turkey, King Quail, Brown Quail, Squatter Pigeon). Two races of Regent Bowerbird are indicated on the map but no mention of races is (correctly) made in the text. Three Great Bowerbird races are indicated on its map yet the text, correctly, mentions only two.

Although a good proportion of the text is reasonably accurate many basic errors are glaring. Some random examples are: Green Pygmy-geese are said to dive strongly, while nothing is said of the diving ability of Cotton Pygmy-geese; but neither are diving ducks. The latter species is given as an 'uncommon vagrant over most of its range' whereas it is often moderately common there. The Sarus Crane is said to be an established breeder in NE Queensland, but it is well documented to be a non-breeding dry season visitor during June–December, which moves west to wetlands of the south-eastern Gulf of Carpentaria to breed through the wet season. The White-headed Pigeon is described as 'One of the shyest and wariest of pigeons. Often the first sign of its presence is a loud clatter of wings as a flock panics into flight close overhead'. This is an accurate description of Topknot, but not of White-headed Pigeons. Though often wary, the White-headed Pigeon is often confiding, ground feeding in some towns. It occurs singly, in pairs, sometimes in small groups, its wings do not clatter loudly and it typically leaves a tree with little sound. Two races of Eclectus Parrot are attributed to northern Cape York Peninsula, the endemic *macgillivrayi* and the New Guinean *polychloris* without explanation (*polychloris* is an occasional visitor to some extreme northern Torres Strait islands, a few km from New Guinea and ~550 km to the north of Iron Range). Double-eyed Fig-Parrots are attributed with 'diving away' (similar to lorikeets?) and showing 'stumpy tail, yellow wingbars'. This parrot does not typically 'dive away' and its wingbars are near impossible to see in flight. White-rumped Swiftlets are said to have 'wings narrow and back-swept in fast flight' but they have a lazy, almost bat-like, flight; never fast with wings back-swept.

White-browed and Mangrove Robins are said to cling to tree trunks and branches, occasionally drooping and flicking wings while watching for prey below. In fact neither feed in this manner nor droop their wings, which they rarely flick. Much of the Russet-tailed Thrush text implying it is fairly easily separated from the Bassian Thrush is incorrect, for it is difficult to separate these near identical species without considerable experience.

Unfortunately there are many more errors. Some incorrect habitat is attributed to a number of species, e.g. Black-breasted Button-quail, White-throated Honeyeater, Hall's Babbler, Paradise Riflebird, Green Catbird. Obvious errors have escaped editing, e.g. the Rose Robin 'forages actively about the upper canopy, flitting about the foliage more like a flycatcher', and yet three sentences later it 'takes prey on ground'. There are some odd statements, e.g. 'The presence of any breeding species of cuckoo is signaled by finding its egg in a host species nest'. Finding nests is often difficult and cuckoo eggs are often extremely similar to those of their host and are identifiable only by an experienced eye. Other information is omitted, e.g. the clapping of the bill at the end of the gobbling call of Marbled Frogmouth, the 'screaming woman' call of the Barking Owl, the cricket-like call of the two Sooty Owls, etc.

With the recent upsurge in birdwatching and ornithology, much new data, especially on bird identification and ageing of importance to field guides, is available but little has been utilised in the present work. Basically, it contains 1980–90s' information presented in a new format. However, its attractive presentation will ensure sales from retail outlets and that is probably where its worth lies – as a guide for the general public. For anyone taking birding even slightly seriously, however, one of the three other Australian field guides presents a better proposition.

Lloyd Nielsen

Mt Molloy, north Queensland

HANDBOOK OF WESTERN AUSTRALIAN BIRDS. VOLUMES I AND II

By R. E. Johnstone and G. M. Storr.

1998 and 2004. Published by the Western Australian Museum, Perth. Hardbacks. Volume I, 436 pp., \$A95, ISBN 0-7307-1208-7. Volume II, 529 pp., \$A130, ISBN 1-920843-11-6.

At last, the long-awaited Volume II of the 'WA Handbook' is complete. Ron Johnstone and the late Glen Storr began this ambitious project in the late 1980s. When Storr died in 1990, much of the groundwork for Volume I (non-passerines) had been done, although it was not until 1998 that it appeared in print. It has taken Johnstone six years to compile the companion volume (passerines), finally published in late 2004. Yet despite this long incubation, the finished volumes are impressive and well worth the wait.

The WA Handbook provides a wealth of information on the morphology, distribution, status, habitat preferences, migrations, nests, eggs, food and behaviour of WA birds. Volume I deals with 343 species of non-passerines, includes colour illustrations and line drawings by six WA artists (Bamford, Darnell, Fleming, Marsack, Miller and Thompson) and 30 full-page colour plates of eggs, reproduced at actual size, which is a most useful inclusion. Also in Volume I

(mostly not repeated in Volume II) are four introductory sections dealing with climate and vegetation, islands, migration and movements, and a brief synopsis of WA avifauna. Volume II deals with 255 species and subspecies of passerines in a similar fashion, using artists Thompson, Darnell and Wright. A delightful addition to Volume II is the inclusion of many splendid drawings of nests – the depiction of nests has been largely absent from Australian ornithological texts since the nest photographs of A. J. North in the early 1900s. Also included are 28 full-page colour plates of eggs (again reproduced at actual size) and three appendices, co-authored by Johnstone and John Darnell, dealing with the birds of Christmas Island and the Cocos-Keeling Islands, and seven non-passerines that were not in Volume I. The text is well set out and easy to read, with the plate numbers (for species illustrations and eggs) given in large bold type conspicuously at the start of each species account.

So, why does WA need its own handbook when we already have an almost completed HANZAB covering the whole of Australia? Surely HANZAB already makes reference to everything published on any Australian bird? True – but it does not necessarily include the personal and unpublished observations of WA birds collected over the working lifetimes of these authors at the WA Museum. Alongside a database of published references, they also kept a meticulous record of the observations of those amateur and professional ornithologists who visited and communicated with the museum. These data, along with specimen details from the museum collection, form a database of over one million records, which is the basis of this handbook.

In some cases, the amount of detail is formidable. For example, lists are given of over 80 islands where Wedge-tailed Shearwaters breed; of about 150 species of flowering plants which attract Brown Honeyeaters; of at least 50 species of plants used as nesting substrate by White-browed Babblers; and so on. However, readers should not expect the WA Handbook to be a complete literature review in the way that HANZAB aims to be. The authors' primary aim was to present the museum database in a readily accessible format, and in this they have succeeded admirably. In some cases, these data are supplemented with references from the literature, but in many other cases the literature has been ignored or not directly referenced. This shortcoming (more obvious in Volume I than Volume II) could make it difficult for students to follow-up information. For example, where would one find the figures behind the 'low annual rate of reproduction' of Baudin's Cockatoo, or the 'explosive increase in numbers and range' of Bourke's Parrot since the 1940s? The probable source for the latter (Ford 1961, *Emu* 61, 211–217) is embedded in the References, but is not given in the text. Therefore the WA Handbook should be used as an addition, rather than an alternative, to HANZAB.

One is left with the impression that literature citations were not updated as the writing progressed. For example:

Major Mitchell Cockatoo. Rowley and Chapman's (1991, *Aust. J. Zool.* **39**, 211–261) information on diet is given, but their extensive data on nests and breeding is not.

Cuckoos. The handbook deals with the four cuckoo species found in the south-western corner of WA and gives an assessment of how frequently their hosts are parasitised. This is an instance where the museum database, used by itself, gives a rather different impression to the literature. For example, White-browed Scrubwrens and Inland Thornbills are said to be occasional hosts of the Fan-tailed Cuckoo; Scarlet Robins and Splendid Fairy-wrens occasional hosts of Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo; and Yellow-throated Miners occasional hosts of the Pallid Cuckoo. In contrast, Brooker and Brooker (1989, *Aust. Zool. Rev.* **2**, 1–67) found that White-browed Scrubwrens and Inland Thornbills were major hosts of the Fan-tailed Cuckoo in the south-west of WA; Splendid Fairy-wrens a major host and Scarlet Robins a common host of Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo; and Yellow-throated Miners a major host of the Pallid Cuckoo.

Rufous Treecreeper. Gary Luck's extensive study of this species at Dryandra and Yilliminning south-east of Perth, published between 1999 and 2003 (e.g. *Emu* **101**, 221–224; *Aust. J. Zool.* **49**, 515–537; *Pacific Cons. Biol.* **7**, 9–20; *Biol. Conserv.* **109**, 1–14), is not mentioned in the text.

Blue-breasted Fairy-wren. The Blue-breasted Fairy-wren is said to be 'now extinct in much of the wheatbelt outside of reserves'. However, this is not quite correct. The species is extinct outside of native vegetation remnants, of which very few are reserves. We have found these wrens breeding in many privately owned patches of native vegetation, some as small as 2 ha. It is these very small, interconnecting remnants that are probably essential for the species' persistence in the wheatbelt (*Wildl. Res.* **28**, 205–214; *Emu* **103**, 185–198).

The taxonomy follows Christides and Boles (1994, RAOU Monograph 2, RAOU, Melbourne) for orders, but not for families or the sequence of species within them. Some of Christides and Boles' families are split (e.g. Procellariidae, Pardalotidae, Artamidae), whereas others are combined (e.g. Anatidae, Psittacidae, Cuculidae, Alcedinidae). The genera, species and subspecies of Christides and Boles, and Schodde and Mason (1999, *The Directory of Australian Birds*, CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne), are not always accepted, some new common names are proclaimed (e.g. Wood Fantail, Western Little Wattlebird, Western White-naped Honeyeater, Shy Groundwren) and some old names resurrected (e.g. Broad-tailed Thornbill, Grey-breasted White-eye). With the inclusion of the Western Little Wattlebird and Western White-naped Honeyeater, Volume II now puts at 16 the number of species endemic to WA.

A quick comparison of the WA Handbook's distribution maps (presumably of species ranges prior to 1998) with the contemporary snapshots given in Atlas II (Barrett *et al.* 2003, *The New Atlas of Australian Birds*, RAOU, Melbourne) shows fairly close agreement for the passerines species. This

can be construed as good news for their conservation. Of concern though, are species such as the Inland Dotterel, whose Handbook range far exceeds that shown in Atlas II. On the other hand, recent records from Atlas II suggest that some species (such as Major Mitchell Cockatoo and White-cheeked Honeyeater) shown with disjunct ranges in the Handbook may, in fact, be more widespread than shown.

We found very few typographical errors. Nicholls *et al.* 2000 and Kusmierski *et al.* 1993 (cited on pages 90 and 293 of Volume II respectively) are not in the References. In Plate 44 of Volume I, the captions for Boobook Owl 5B and 5C both read 'male of northern form' – whereas 5B looks like a juvenile to us. In our copy of Volume II, one distribution map (Tawny-crowned Honeyeater, page 137) has become stretched, so that its range appears to extend north to Barrow Island, instead of to Kalbarri. More importantly, the map given for the Rufous-throated Honeyeater (page 145) is actually that of the Bar-breasted Honeyeater, thus the Rufous-throated map is missing. Including titles for the maps may have avoided this type of error and made referencing the maps easier for the reader.

It is inevitable that in such a large work, the reviewer tends to concentrate on the few negatives rather than the overall impression, which is of a vast body of highly detailed information. As pointed out above, some highlights of Volume II are the line-drawings of nests and nestlings, and while one might initially find fault (Shy Heathwren nests are usually much better concealed than shown), the meticulous drawings have obviously been done so as to depict details of nests rather than accurately describe their positioning or level of concealment. Make sure not to miss the drawing of a Noisy Scrub-bird hatchling on page 19 of Volume II; or the amazing nest of the Golden-headed Cisticola on page 332. Another delightful aspect of the handbook is the quality of the full-page colour plates of species, which in detail, jizz and colour are quite the equal of HANZAB plates. In addition, there are a few magnificent photographs of individual species, including the Square-tailed Kite, Black Grasswren, Red-eared Firetail and Western Bristlebird. As for the text, perhaps some of the most interesting and informative sections are the Remarks. For example, at the end of the Noisy Scrub-bird account is given the whole history of the discovery, re-discovery and present translocation program for this fascinating bird. A similar account is given of the history of the Western Bristlebird. For the Emu, formerly classed as vermin, details are given of the numbers killed and the number of bounties paid before the upgrading of rabbit-proof fences prevented their movement into the SW agricultural lands.

The geography of WA is unique with its small winter-wet zone in the south-western corner, its summer-wet zone in the Kimberley and 2000 km of arid country in between. The museum database has been used to examine movements within and between these zones and to document previous and continuing colonisation of the south-west by northern

waterbirds and arid-zone species. This could prove a fertile ground for further research, especially when (or if) climate is changing owing to global warming.

The WA Handbook is unlikely to be superseded for a very long time. It is encyclopaedic in the extent of information provided, much of which is not available elsewhere, and it is therefore an essential reference for any present or future student of WA birds. It is very reasonably priced for such a work – as the primary reference for WA birds it is an investment that can only increase in value in the future. It is very highly recommended.

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OWLS: JOURNEYS AROUND THE WORLD

By David Hollands

2004. Published by Bloomings Books, Melbourne, Australia. 239 pp. Hardback, \$A59.95, ISBN 1-876473-50-9.

This lavish full-colour book is an author's indulgence, and there is nothing wrong with that. Hollands has spent considerable time, money and, apparently boundless, energy in producing what is a celebration of owls and, evidently, of his feeling of good fortune in being able to travel and experience them. I enjoyed his writing and, as a bird photographer, admired his images. He notes that this is not a scientific contribution, and indeed it contains limited biology, but while Hollands states that his contribution to owl knowledge is small, this is far less true of his 1991 book on Australian species.

This new work describes experiences with 21 owl species, in company of fellow enthusiasts, in England (Barn Owl), American Alaska (Snowy), Argentina (Burrowing), Austria (Eagle and Long-eared), Christmas Island (Christmas Island Hawk), Costa Rica (Spectacled, Ferruginous Pygmy and Pacific Screech), Finland (Ural, European Pygmy, Tengmalm's and Great Grey), Japan (Blakiston's Fish), USA (Spotted), Australia (Lesser Sooty, Rufous and Powerful) and South Africa (White-faced Scops, Spotted Eagle and Verreaux's Owls). Hollands's owl-loving hosts and their work are described, if not illustrated. Several black and white photographs taken of British Barn Owls in 1961 attest to Hollands's long-term owl obsession. Photographs are well and generously reproduced, many filling a full (285 × 210 mm) page or more. Photographically the new section on Lesser Sooty Owls adds nothing to the one in the 1991 book, whereas three pictures of almost and just fledged Rufous Owls are new. New full page Powerful Owl pictures include two of an adult that are sharper and two of an adult and one of an advanced nestling that are softer than those in the 1991 book.

The text appears free of typographical errors and the only factual (and trivial) errors noted are that an owl said to be sitting on eggs is actually on nestlings (p. 130) and a tree

identified as a palm is not one (p. 198). I was disappointed to read of an active owls' nest entrance being temporarily plugged in order to photograph the, impeded and frustrated, parents. Most photographs are exceptional: just a few are slightly soft, these obviously reflecting limited time (a single day, for Spotted Owls, to a week or two at overseas locations) and severely demanding conditions. That some species are easily photographed while others are incredibly difficult, even for this master, is clear. There are too many wonderful photographs among the 150 (some of birds other than owls) to detail, but I was particularly impressed by, and envious of, those of a flying Snowy Owl, a pair of Christmas Island Hawk Owls said to be mating (although the female's tail position and that the male on her upper back indicate otherwise at that instant), full-page pictures of Ural, Blakiston's, Spotted, Rufous, and a pair of Powerful Owls. Declines in owl populations owing to loss of habitats and/or nesting sites resulting from increases in human populations loom large in this account. Humanity is seemingly not as wise as the proverbial *Athene*.

Given its content, size, quality, and not unreasonable price, this book will thrill owl enthusiasts, bird photographers, and people appreciative of fine photographic bird books of this genre. It is refreshingly individualistic and deserving of success for author and publisher.

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HERONS, EGRETS AND BITTERNS: THEIR BIOLOGY AND CONSERVATION IN AUSTRALIA

By Neil McKilligan

2005. Published by CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne, Australia. 134 pp., 8 colour plates, numerous black and white text photographs, drawings and graphics. Paperback, \$A35, ISBN 0-643-09133-5.

This is another in the *Australian Natural History Series* from CSIRO Publishing and follows two other recent ornithological titles, on kookaburras (see review in *Emu* **104**, 387–389) and Australian Magpies (see review in *Emu* **105**, 188–189). All three books more-or-less succeed in the aim as stated in the Preface of *Hérons, Egrets and Bitterns* of focusing on families of Australian birds and 'making the facts and principles of their biology and conservation accessible to a wide readership'. Like the others, this book is not heavy science, although it is soundly based on the science of the Ardeidae that the author has made his life's work.

The first chapter sets the scene by putting the Australian herons within their worldwide context. The Ardeidae is divided into four sub-families: the day herons, the night herons, the tiger herons, which are not represented in Australia, and the bitterns. The next chapter, 'What makes

herons different?', considers the morphological characteristics that define the Ardeidae and concludes with a consideration of heron diversity, stemming from the various species' exploitation of different kinds of prey. Chapter 3, 'The importance of herons', outlines the value of herons as bioindicators, their response to environmental contaminants, and their possible effects on aquaculture. In some parts of the world herons have been slaughtered because of their perceived deleterious effect on farmed fish and crustaceans, possibly unfairly since their overall effect may be exaggerated, but in any case there may be less destructive (but still economically feasible) ways, such as exclusion netting, of protecting fish farms from potential predators.

The next three chapters deal with more basic heron biology: 'Distribution, movements and longevity', 'Feeding and food', and 'Breeding', are self-explanatory and should answer all questions on these topics as they apply to the Ardeidae. As in the previous chapters, much ground is covered here but some topics are treated briefly as is to be expected in a volume of this size.

Chapter 7, 'Population numbers and conservation', is given appropriately generous treatment: herons, as mostly wetland species, are in the forefront of conservation concerns given the ongoing degradation of our wetlands, especially because of the continuing diversion of water to agriculture. One of the difficulties identified when considering heron conservation is that reliable counts, or even estimates, of the populations of the various species are difficult to obtain. Although this especially applies to the secretive and retiring species, it is also the case with some of those that nest colonially since their heronries are subject to extreme fluctuations in size from year to year. Nevertheless, some estimates of species populations are available and the author considers these on a region by region basis. It is interesting that it is only in the last decade or so that some of our most important breeding areas for herons (and other waterbirds) have been discovered. Prominent among these are the Top End of the Northern Territory and the Channel Country of the Lake Eyre Basin; it is suggested that along the Queensland coast significant heronries may yet remain undiscovered, especially in the remote Gulf of Carpentaria. While some of these places remain pristine, the wetlands of the Murray–Darling Basin, which have in the past supported very large numbers of breeding waterbirds, have been devastated by periods of low rainfall and by the diversion of water for cropping: the Macquarie Marshes, the Barmah–Millewa Forest on the Murray, the Gwydir Wetlands, and others have all been severely and adversely affected. Although the author discusses environmental water allocations and considers how these should be used to best restore some of the natural qualities of our wetlands, it is difficult not to be pessimistic: the fact is that floods of historical proportions are not going to be

restored to the great wetlands of the Murray–Darling in the foreseeable future.

Finally, there are individual accounts of the 14 (of 60 worldwide) heron species resident in Australia and briefer accounts of six occasional visitors. Each of the former includes a written section, a distribution map adapted from the *New Atlas of Australian Birds* (RAOU, 2003), a vignette of the species taken from the same source and, where relevant to the species, a map of its breeding locations in the Top End based on work done as recently as the 1990s. The written account varies in length between species and is longest for the Cattle Egret, which is well-studied and well-known to the author. The brevity of some of the other accounts is, as the author points out, partly a reflection of the limited information available for them. The vignettes vary in quality: some are excellent whereas others leave a bit to be desired. The accounts for the six rarities, which are basically curiosities on the Australian list, are short and unillustrated; three of the species have been recorded only once each in Australia and the others only very occasionally, in most cases on outlying territories.

The presence of an index is welcome and highlights a significant omission from the kookaburra and Australian Magpie titles mentioned earlier. As is all too frequent these days when publishers are said to be economising by cutting back on the use of editors and proofreaders, there are a few production problems to detail, although this book is far from the worst case I have seen lately. Punctuation is erratic throughout; the picture on page 28 is rotated through 90 degrees; on page 8 the House Sparrow is given the Great Tit's scientific name *Parus major*; the name of Schrenck's Bittern is misspelled throughout its account and in the index (but is correct on page 6); and I spotted a number of typographical errors. Some journal titles in the References are italicised and some are not. A decision on punctuation when a scientific name follows a common name – commas or parentheses – was apparently too hard so both are tried (actually, omitting all punctuation, a convention recently abandoned by *Emu* but still used elsewhere, is better than either, in my opinion). There are not enough problems to make this a major criticism, but the overall result is irritating and untidy and the book should have been cleaned up before publication.

This a useful summary of the state of knowledge of Australia's Ardeidae and deserves to find a wide readership; it may perhaps also stimulate further work to help fill some of the large gaps in what we know of this spectacular group. And hopefully we can look forward to more such titles in the Australian Natural History Series.

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