

Book reviews

BIRDS OF SOUTH ASIA. THE RIPLEY GUIDE VOLUME I: FIELD GUIDE, VOLUME II: ATTRIBUTES AND STATUS

By Pamela C. Rasmussen, and John C. Anderton

2005. Published by Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, USA and Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain. Vol. 1, 378 pp., ISBN 84-87334-65-2; Vol. 2, 683 pp. ISBN 84-87334-66-0. Hardcover, \$A180.

This is a lovely book – in fact, it is a wonderful book. A truly fine piece of work that helps puts Asian birding on the front foot of world birding and ornithology.

We have returned from field-work in Asia since early May 2005, eight weeks at the time of our writing, and during that time there has rarely been a moment when either volume has not been open on one of our desks. These two volumes, as one might expect from two great publishing houses, are a pleasure to handle and dwell on. Ridgeley's superb two volume work on the birds of Ecuador set a fine new precedent in dividing the purely field guide material from more in depth, scholarly details of distribution and discussions of taxonomy, among others, and it works especially well in this instance. The *Birds of South Asia* extends the coverage from the traditional Indian subcontinent to include a more complete bio-geographic region. Thus it covers Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in addition to Afghanistan and the Chagos Archipelago. The latter two areas have not previously been covered by a field guide.

Volume 1 is purely and simply a field guide, and we were immediately struck by how neat and compact it is. This volume contains 180 colour plates depicting ~2500 species and sub-species in more than 3400 illustrations. Each species, with the exception of a handful of vagrants or extralimital species, is also assigned a clearly marked and seemingly remarkably accurate map. Twelve artists have contributed to this volume and in general this works well because their styles do not vary as greatly and as jarringly as they do in some other field guides, a factor we find leads to confusion and possibly misidentification in some guides. We especially like John Anderton's illustrations, which look very clean, accurate and convincing. It was, however, a surprise to see Larry McQueen's name in the list of artists as we had always associated him with the Neotropics. Nevertheless we also found his illustrations very attractive. All in all this volume should work nicely and we look forward to using it in the field.

Volume 2 is quite simply superb! What else would we expect from Pamela Rasmussen, who has already made so many sound and far-ranging contributions to Asian ornithology? In several ways the book bespeaks almost as much of what the senior author has excluded as for what she has included. This volume describes and discusses in detail 1441 species (not including rejected and possibly present species)

and a little over 2500 taxa (including subspecies, rejected and 'possible' species but not extralimital ones). The introductory sections are quickly fascinating and include a clear preface to the coverage of the book. This includes discussions of the *Geography and avifauna* giving a broad-brush picture of climate, geography and the biogeography; *Moult and plumages*; *Measurements*; *Illustrations*; *Identification*; and *Vocalisations*. We were personally very appreciative of the way the authors had attributed the names of sound recordists. It is also refreshing to have descriptions of voices together with sonograms that are specifically identified to locality. This is an invaluable tool for those interested in the variation in vocalizations between and within taxa. Other sections discuss *Taxonomy*; *Maps*; and *Records*. The introductory section concludes with a *History of ornithology in South Asia*; *Conservation*; and *Acknowledgements*. Despite some recent criticisms of the books' treatment of the contribution of important earlier figures such as Baker and the now infamous Colonel Meinertzhagen, we (and others that we know of) are appreciative of the detailed appraisal of the history.

The species accounts that follow in Volume 2 are exceptional. Typically they cover identification, extralimital range, the range within South Asia including the gross distribution of different subspecies, habits, habitat, vocalizations and taxonomy. As pointed out earlier, each species account is cram-packed with carefully crafted sections of highly digestible information that will surely set the standard for any future guides within the Oriental Region. The level of diligence and detail attended to by the authors is clear and made even more so by an article by Rasmussen on the making of the book (see below).

Undoubtedly one facet of this book that will place it under the spotlight is its review of the region's species-level taxonomy and generic placement. Some may regard the relatively sweeping changes as controversial, while others, including ourselves, will find the entire discussion refreshing. Several authors have commented recently that the taxonomy of Asian birds has lagged behind other regions. This book, along with various papers published recently, is steadily redressing this situation. The authors have made 131 species-level changes from *Checklist of the Birds of the Oriental Region* (Inskipp *et al.* 1996). We can personally vouch for the appropriateness of several of the proposed changes, for example: Bhutan Laughingthrush from Streaked Laughingthrush; the division of the two rather distinct and geographically separate populations of Wedge-billed Wren-Babbler into two species; and the major overhaul of the Large-billed Crow complex. These changes notwithstanding, it will be important to see these proposals published in detail. Given Rasmussen's outstanding track record we are confident that this will only be a matter of time.

Just as we were completing this review we received a copy of Pamela Rasmussen's exposition *On producing Birds of*

South Asia (Indian Birds 3, 50–56). This is essential reading for anyone with a passing interest in either this particular book or the ornithology of the South Asia region. For those contemplating a similar project it is a warning of what can and should be involved and a primer of how to go about doing it.

Finally, it was pleasing to see an appreciation of Dillon S. Ripley (written by Bruce Beehler) whose contribution to the ornithology of South Asia was huge. As Beehler points out this is Dillon Ripley's last hurrah! And how truly appropriate that is.

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THE HOWARD AND MOORE COMPLETE CHECKLIST OF THE BIRDS OF THE WORLD: THIRD EDITION

Edited by Edward C. Dickinson
2003. Published by Christopher Helm, London, UK.
1039 pp. Hardcover, \$A180, ISBN 0-7136-6536-X.

This is a large compact and completely revised work that supersedes two previous editions and deviates from the last major arrangement of species according to Sibley and Monroe (1990, *Distribution and Taxonomy of Birds of the World*, Yale University Press). The work follows the most recent reviews and arrangements of avian taxonomy. It represents years of literature search that has kept the taxonomic decisions of experts up to date and uses several well known consultants to ensure accurate regional representation. The result is a complete professional listing of the world's avifauna that may be considered a proud achievement.

Within the work there are three major sections. First, the introduction, a lead-up to avian systematics and the set-up and design of the current book. Second, the complete list of birds, as currently accepted, in systematic arrangement; each species is given by its scientific name, followed by its English name. For each species there is a list of accepted subspecies, their author(s), and a brief outline of distribution. Finally there are chapters discussing nomenclature, bibliographic details and references, and indexes of both scientific and English names.

I found that even for a work of this magnitude, and with so many people working on it, there is an extraordinarily high number of errors! Musing over these and having the occasional chuckle I considered marking my own copy to correct the obvious and not so obvious errors. I need not have worried for a random internet search found that these errors have been attended to by the Editor. Dickinson has produced

a list of amendments. Any serious devotee of avian nomenclature should visit this website at <http://www.naturalis.nl/sites/naturalis.en/contents/i000777/corrigenda%202.1.pdf> and investigate it as it is of great value to the addicted bird researcher.

Although much of the content is unscathed by the pen of the taxonomist/systematist, the taxonomy is of a standard usually found in most modern texts but as usual there are occasional diversions. Many of these diversions are the result of recent peer reviewed research and, as the work is claimed to be up to date, the research and inclusion of these published results are to be commended. However there are times when there are even deviations from this. One such instance is the separation of the south-western Pacific *Pachycephala* whistlers into myriad species without apparent justification and it could be argued that this is not currently warranted. Needless to say this group needs a major reshuffle but let us wait until the research is done. This is an example of the 'putting the cart before the horse' syndrome. I know of researchers working on *Pachycephala* who would feel their work has been 'gazumped'.

Other genera continue to be tossed from pillar to post, such as the Lewin's Rail. In the past 50 years Lewin's Rail has graced the genera *Rallus*, *Dryolimnas* and, now, *Lewinia*. I wonder if it will ever find its rightful home. Thankfully in these instances the text explains the reasoning behind the changes. This is but one example of the state of Australasia's ornithology based upon a world view. Readers may identify many other cases – I leave these for them to find.

Despite the many errors and digressions, I found the tome extremely valuable and a most useful tool. I have a copy within easy reach of both my work and home desks. A comparison was made with a work on another animal class, the mammals, and I concluded that ornithologists of the world can hold their heads high as the quality of our taxonomy far surpasses that work and the accuracy of the comparable mammalian reference matter. With the Editor's promise of periodically updating the work, we should continue to have a most valuable contribution to the avian literature.

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DUCKS, GEESE AND SWANS: ANSERIFORMES

Edited by Janet Kear
2005. Bird Families of the World Series. Published by Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK. 908 pp. in 2 volumes. Hardcover, \$A420, ISBN 0-19-854645-9 (the set).

These handsome volumes represent the sixteenth work in the OUP series on the bird families of the world. The book covers the Anseriformes – a large, diverse order with oddities such as the screamers of South America alongside the very

familiar waterfowl (or wildfowl) that occupy our urban and agricultural landscapes and wild places worldwide. The book is divided into two parts spread over two volumes. Part I consists of eight general chapters covering the biology and ecology of the order, while Part II contains the species accounts. All 165 species of the order are covered, including several that are known to be extinct.

The general chapters of Part I include an introductory chapter and chapters on taxonomy and systematics, feeding ecology, ecology of social behaviour, breeding strategies and biology, movements and migration, population dynamics, and conservation and management. The authorship of each chapter varies, as does the authority and scope of the writing. The writing style is scientific with some chapters providing a useful review of the contemporary literature. In recent years there has been a rapid expansion in our knowledge of the biology and ecology of waterfowl with the advent of new molecular techniques and tracking technologies. This has markedly improved our understanding of where waterfowl go, population structures, energy reserve dynamics and breeding biology. Some chapters better reflect this contemporary knowledge worldwide than others. Many of the chapters have a northern hemisphere or European bias that is acknowledged by one of the authors. The writing is at its best when the authors draw together aspects of the biology and ecology of this diverse group of birds using examples from around the globe. For example, the chapter on the breeding biology of waterfowl compared and contrasted mating systems, breeding strategies, nesting, egg and clutch sizes, incubation, hatching and rearing, fledging, breeding success and moult in a wide range of species. Australian species differ from long-distance seasonal migrants in their responses to environmental cues and aspects of their breeding biology and ecology. This chapter provided the context to understand those similarities and differences and was the only one to adequately cite the contemporary literature when referring to Australian species.

Elsewhere, the citing of the literature when referring to the Australian species is somewhat eclectic. For instance, in the chapter on feeding ecology there is a section on niche separation that uses Australian ducks as an example. With its assumptions of inter-specific competition and resource limitation, the concept of niche separation is not particularly useful for understanding the ecology of Australian ducks. The idea that there are selection pressures for morphological differentiation in co-existing species is an old one that has little relevance to dynamic systems where prey abundance varies markedly in time and space. Most ecologists have moved on and this section is out of place here. The European perspective of the authors is also evident in the introductory chapter that passes quickly from descriptions of wetland habitats to a lengthy treatise of human association with waterfowl. This section only mentions non-western cultures in a historical context, making no mention of the long asso-

ciation of Asian cultures and others with waterfowl. Nonetheless, this section on the history of domestication and farming, hunting, aviculture and decoys made interesting reading. Here I learned that the word 'decoy' comes from the Dutch *de kooi*, meaning 'the cage', and originally referred to what now would be called a 'duck blind'. Only in recent times has 'decoy' referred to the carved wooden model deployed to lure waterfowl into range of hunters, particularly in North America.

The chapter on 'ecology of social behaviour' is relatively brief. This chapter begins with the observation that waterfowl 'are complex creatures' and goes on to briefly discuss resource selection in abstract terms before launching into a discussion on monogamy and the formation of the pairbond, paternity, predator avoidance and foraging. To this reviewer the chapter came across as a loose collection of facts on topics much better handled in other chapters. The chapters on 'movements and migrations' and 'population dynamics' draw mostly on the large body of research that has been conducted on the long-distance seasonal migrants in the northern hemisphere. This is understandable in that the movements and dynamics of waterfowl populations moving between their wintering grounds and arctic breeding areas have captured the imaginations of biologists for centuries. However, in a book on a globally distributed order with a diverse ecology, the reader could reasonably expect comment on the state of our current understanding of movements, migrations and population dynamics in waterfowl populations globally. Despite the limited scope of some of the writing there is much interesting reading and useful insights gained from drawing together data from across the order Anseriformes. Illuminating to me were the maps of species diversity, which show that some regions, such as the Korean peninsula, have as many as 35 extant species of waterfowl. This is more than double that which could be seen in any region of Australia.

The beautifully produced plates of Mark Hulme's artwork are a feature of the book and are collected together at the start of the species accounts in Part II. Each plate is a collection of 3–8 related or similar species, showing both sexes if the plumages are different and occasionally juveniles, young and subspecies. In all there are 30 plates with all extant species shown except a couple of curious omissions, including the Grey Teal, *Anas gracilis*. The only other omission I could find was the Andaman Teal, *Anas albogularis*. The Editor offers no comment as to why these two were omitted. Perhaps these two similar looking teal were just too plain for a book filled with illustrations of waterfowl with richly coloured plumages! Each species account has a description of adult, moult, immature, and duckling plumages; measurements and weights; field characters; voice; range and status; habitat and general habits; displays and breeding behaviour; breeding and life cycle; and conservation and threats. The treatment given to each species is not uniform and emphasis

varies depending on what the author of the species account considered most significant for that species. Each account has a map showing breeding and non-breeding distributions. The accounts are referenced and this book is a useful resource for anyone interested in the biology and ecology of the world's waterfowl. For the species of most interest to this reviewer, the Grey Teal, the map showing the region of overlap in range with the Indonesian Teal, *Anas gibberifrons*, was most instructive. Such an understanding is difficult to appreciate from descriptions in regional publications on waterfowl or regional bird guides. Not all such overlaps between similar species are highlighted in the book and its inclusion in this case reflects the interest of the author who wrote the account and the latitude given them by the editor. Here lies the great value of this book—a consistent scientific treatment of all 165 species with enough scope to expand on points deemed crucial by the author of the species account. Would I want a copy on my bookshelf? Definitely.

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THE HAWAIIAN HONEYCREEPERS

By H. Douglas Pratt

2005. Bird Families of the World Series. Published by Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK. 342 pp. Hardcover, £95, \$US189.50 or \$A260, ISBN 0-19-854653-X.

Hawaiian Honeycreepers are a renowned case of adaptive radiation in birds: an amazing variety of species, 50+ described so far, all evolved from an ancestral finch in the short time frame of a few million years. As their name states, these birds are unique to the Hawaiian Islands. Evolution for specialised diets has moulded the bill shape of honeycreepers into an unimaginable diversity of forms, more so than with Galapagos finches. Perhaps because of this diversity, the editors of Oxford University Press stretched taxonomic classification a bit and gave Hawaiian Honeycreepers honorary family status (the birds are actually members of the Carduelidae, the cardueline finches) and their own monograph in the eminent *Bird Families of the World* series.

The editors also favoured the honeycreepers by enlisting Doug Pratt as author. Pratt (no relation to the reviewer) was well qualified by his personal familiarity with these birds, not only through extensive research in the field, museum, and library, but also by his talented artwork, for he painted the eight colour plates depicting all 37 historically known species. Development of the book was timely, too, as the landmark series, *The Birds of North America*, was then being published, and its species' accounts for Hawaiian birds offered an unprecedented goldmine of hard-earned informa-

tion. Pratt's excellent synthesis is the first modern and comprehensive treatise of the Hawaiian honeycreepers.

The Hawaiian Honeycreepers follows the general format of previous monographs in the series. Notable in the front material is a sympathetic section on the spelling and pronunciation of tongue-twisting, vowel-rich, Hawaiian names and words (Can you say `Akiapōlā`au? Or distinguish the `Ō`ū from the `Ou`?). The meat of the book is to be found in the ten general chapters of Part I and the species accounts in Part II. Part I is especially well crafted to feature honeycreeper themes, including adaptive radiation, insular evolution, and conservation issues, particularly avian disease.

The first chapter, *The Hawaiian honeycreepers: evolutionary triumph and ecological tragedy*, introduces the honeycreepers in the context of adaptive radiation and identifies their vulnerability as insular species. *The honeycreepers' world* sets the environmental and evolutionary stage of the Hawaiian Islands, the most isolated landmass on our planet, briefly chronicles its dismantling during the course of human settlement, and highlights impacts on the birds. *Discovery and research: historical perspectives* is just that, although this overview goes no further than the early 1990s and thereby omits perhaps the most active period of field research (results of these most recent studies are picked up and effectively covered in later chapters and species accounts). Chapters 4 and 5, *Origin and evolution* and *Classification*, examine historical hypotheses on the phylogeny of honeycreepers, a subject particularly dear to the author, who has spent much of his career researching the topic; Pratt's systematic conclusions and taxonomic recommendations have been largely adopted by the American Ornithologists' Union. Although Pratt claims that he follows AOU nomenclature in this book, in fact he slips in a few changes not yet accepted by the AOU, e.g. the sinking of genus *Vestiaria* in *Drepanis* and some additional species splitting. Three chapters, *Form and function*, *Behaviour*, and *Ecology and breeding biology*, fill out what is known about the adaptive radiation in the honeycreepers while explaining the birds' biology. Adaptive radiation involves more than foraging specialisation and lock-and-key bill form: there are consequences for reproductive behaviour and life history. These consequences are not explored with the same depth, mainly because they have not yet received much coverage in the primary literature.

Disease and parasites reviews current knowledge of the main problem afflicting honeycreepers today – a now classic case of disease as a wildlife conservation issue. In a nutshell, two diseases, avian malaria and pox virus, were accidentally introduced to Hawai'i and spread by another non-native organism, the night-flying mosquito. Honeycreepers highly susceptible to these diseases perished at the lower elevations inhabited by mosquitoes, and as a result the majority of species are confined to mountain tops and many are now endangered. This is a story that avian conservationists in

Hawai'i know by heart, and Pratt does an excellent job explaining it. *Status, conservation, and the future* sums up the remaining factors affecting honeycreeper survival, and the chapter gives a brief appraisal of what can be done to save the honeycreepers.

The *Species accounts* themselves are short and to the point, each generally 1–4 pages in length. Accounts include range maps and sonograms, when available. Readers looking for more detail should instead turn to *The Birds of North America*. Interestingly, *The Hawaiian Honeycreepers* also gives accounts for all known extinct species, both historic and subfossil, in appreciation that the missing species would be members of the modern avifauna if not for human-caused extinctions. Readers should be prepared for a long roster of the dead, as most species are gone and only 17 survive.

The Hawaiian Honeycreepers is well in line with other titles in the *Bird Families of the World* series and is arguably one of the best. It reflects a high level of scholarship and has benefited from a decade of preparation. Pratt's writing style is almost conversational and makes for thoroughly enjoyable reading. Pratt's plates are gorgeous, and numerous black-and-white photos of honeycreepers in action illustrate the text and bring the birds alive. This book is a classic summa-

tion of honeycreepers and will be a handy reference for many years to come.

This review would be remiss not to draw attention to the book's price. Oxford initially offered *The Hawaiian Honeycreepers* at US\$68, then soon raised the price to US\$189, which put it beyond the reach of many individual buyers. Future authors may want to consider this drawback when selecting a publisher.

The Hawaiian honeycreepers may seem a little far afield for most *Emu – Austral Ornithology* readers. However, as this book so well presents, the honeycreepers really are one of the most glorious adaptive radiations in birds, essentially an entire avifauna sprung from a single lineage, one novel species after another to admire. Sadly, the honeycreepers also offer an extreme hard-luck case demonstrating how an onslaught of continental species and processes can sweep away an insular world of birds. Much can be learned from this book about evolutionary creation and human-caused destruction.

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