

Book reviews

THE BIRDS OF BORNEO

By Clive F. Mann

2008. Published by the British Ornithologists' Union and British Ornithologists' Club, Peterborough, UK. BOU Checklist Series No. 23. 440 pp., 28 colour pages containing 68 colour plates. Hardcover, £50, \$A130, ISBN 9780907446286.

The British Ornithologists' Union checklist series offers scholarly reviews of distributions of species within a country or region. Clive Mann's *Birds of Borneo* succeeds in being both thorough and accessible, and will be indispensable to anyone wanting more detailed distributional information than that given in field guides.

Borneo is the third largest island in the world, comprised of Brunei, the Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah, and the four Indonesian provinces of Kalimantan. Over 630 bird species have been recorded, of which over 40 (depending on one's taxonomy) are endemic. Borneo is a popular birding destination, but most visitors confine themselves to a handful of sites in Sabah. The rest of this vast island is poorly known and its birds are fast disappearing as forest is cleared by logging, fire and plantations.

Visitors interested only in identifying birds will manage with the standard *Field Guide to the Birds of Borneo, Sumatra, Java, and Bali* by John MacKinnon and Karen Phillipps or the new *Birds of Borneo* by Susan Myers. For those interested in the general natural history of each species, more depth is offered by the 1999 edition of the *Birds of Borneo* by Bertram Smythies and Geoffrey Davison. Clive Mann's BOU checklist is for those interested in the detail of geographical distributions of species and breeding seasons. Bird distribution across much of Borneo, especially Kalimantan, is poorly known and documented across many, often obscure, journals and reports. For each species, the book collates all published records and many unpublished records, referenced to observer. A few additional uncited records exist in the grey literature and the internet but these are rarely away from popular and well-

documented sites. Each species has a status code and summary of its global and Bornean distribution. A list of locations is given for each state or province, with altitudes where available, a reference and sometimes annotated notes on habitat and abundance. All breeding records are also presented by state or province. Habitat and any taxonomic uncertainties or recent revisions are summarised. Coordinates are given for all locations in a gazetteer. A 32 page list of references confirms the thorough literature review which underpins the book. This includes numerous publications by Clive Mann himself, who lived in Brunei for ten years and brings much personal insight into this work.

The book contains 68 colour photographs, 42 illustrating Borneo's varied habitats and 26 of a variety of birds. The habitat images help the reader to comprehend the species' habitat descriptions but the bird images do little except illustrate a range of families and iconic species. Twenty pages of introduction skim over history, geography, vegetation, other fauna, taxonomy and avifaunal biogeography, and offer a more detailed account of ornithological history in Borneo. Conservation is given less than a page while noting that loss of lowland forests is reaching critical proportions in some areas.

As with other BOU checklists, this book is set to become the standard reference for the distribution and breeding of birds on Borneo. As it mostly comprises of lists of localities, it is a dry reference book; it could be a very useful resource if these data were converted into GIS layers for visual display and analysis. The book highlights gaps in knowledge and the large number of extremely poorly known species which need targeted field research to help inform their conservation. It is hoped that this book will inspire further exploration of the famous but still relatively poorly known and increasingly threatened birds of Borneo.

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CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE HISTORY OF AUSTRALASIAN ORNITHOLOGY

Edited by William E. Davis Jr, Harry E. Recher, Walter E. Boles and Jerome A. Jackson

2008. Published by Nuttall Ornithological Club, Cambridge, MA, USA and CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne, Australia. 481 pp., 101 figures. Hardback, \$AU99.95, ISBN 9781877973437.

This book is a collection of seven unlinked chapters relating to the history of ornithology in Australasia. Four of the chapters focus narrowly on the history of specific scientific institutions – the Auckland Museum (the only chapter concerned with matters beyond Australia), the Western Australian Museum, CSIRO and the Australian National Wildlife Collection. One chapter focuses on the contribution to Australian ornithology of John Gilbert. The two remaining chapters are more expansive reviews of the

development of major themes in Australian ornithology – conservation, and biogeography and systematics.

This is clearly an odd miscellany. Anyone seeking a more coherent and integrated account of the history of Australian ornithology should look instead to Libby Robin's *The Flight of the Emu* (2001) or the now dated *The Literature of Australian Birds* (1954) by H. M. Whittell. This present volume differs from these in considering a few particular topics in much greater depth, and its scope is accordingly self-confined, as recognised in the admirably modest "Contribution to . . ." title. In their very brief preface, the editors note the volume's genesis following from a two (soon to be four) volume comparable account of North American ornithological history.

It is a worthy task to commission and collate these historical accounts; and maybe some of these chapters would not have been compiled without such an outlet. But that doesn't necessarily make for a good book. I doubt that I will ever re-read, or need to refer to, most of the chapters. The audience for some chapters is

telephone-box small, and the editors haven't helped by not demanding that the institutional accounts be placed within, or refer to, a broader context.

Nonetheless, some commonalities can be found across the chapters. In telling these histories, the chapter authors consistently mark changes in our society's attitudes to the environment and research. We live in a world beset by change of increasing pace and amplitude, and it is heartening to know that our culture may be sufficiently dynamic to adapt to, harness or direct such change. One other loosely-woven common thread is the impact of committed individuals. Australasian ornithology is a small field, and we have been lucky to have been gifted some extraordinary individuals, whose contributions have been pivotal, sustained and/or insightful. Each chapter recognises the great advances in ornithology from one or more such individuals. Somewhat awkwardly, some authors present themselves in this light; humility is not especially evident, and we're instead presented with an unusual autobiographical hagiography.

The modest John Gilbert was one individual whose contribution to Australian ornithology (and zoology more broadly) was extraordinarily significant, and well worth celebrating. In the opening chapter, Clemency Fisher gives a long (119 pp) account of Gilbert's brief life (he died at 33, killed by spearing on Leichhardt's expedition) and his Australian work. Gilbert was employed by John Gould to collect Australian animals, and his collections provided the reliable, extensive and deep foundation for Gould's numerous publications and discoveries. Working at or beyond the fringes of settlement, from 1838 to 1845, Gilbert collected the type specimens of about 8% of Australian bird and mammal taxa, as well as many new species of plants, invertebrates, fish and reptiles. The achievement is remarkable, and well merits this comprehensive account. In this chapter, Clemency Fisher recognises his virtues, as a brilliant bushman, an acute observer of landscapes and species, and a tireless worker. Although A. H. Chisholm previously (in a series of papers from 1938 to 1945) provided celebratory accounts of Gilbert's life and contribution to Australian ornithology, this chapter provides the most definitive and detailed account, especially in providing a thorough cross-referencing of museum specimens against the narrative of Gilbert's travels.

But biography should be about more than a listing of dates and achievements. Gilbert achieved little recognition in his lifetime. There is no picture of him, other than one reconstructed much later from brief written descriptions. His social status was well below that of his employer, Gould, and he lacked Gould's exquisite capability for self-promotion. Out of human interest, I'd have liked more consideration of his relationship with Gould, but perhaps the scraps of documentation are too meagre to construct such a story. Similarly, the chapter's account of his uneasy relationship with Ludwig Leichhardt is fascinating but frustratingly brief. For posterity, Gilbert's life is marked almost entirely by the extent and novelty of his biological collections, and his detailed notes that accompany them.

Collecting and displaying biological curiosities became an interest and obsession in the Victorian age, especially catalysed by the discovery and exploration of new worlds and their strange biota. Three chapters in this volume provide accounts of the development of such collections and the institutions that housed

them: the Auckland Museum (B. J. Gill), the Western Australian Museum (Ron Johnstone) and the far more recent Australian National Wildlife Collection (Richard Schodde). These accounts are of specialised historical interest, but collectively chart an interesting and at times difficult progression in the role of museums, from places that present curios to the public to research centres that play a critical role in the conservation and understanding of our natural environments. All three accounts note periods of constraint through financial stricture. Some accounts implicitly or with interesting candour note sustained hostilities amongst rival curatorial staff. Some suggest disquiet with having to adapt to changing public expectations of the role of museums and wildlife collections, including an increasing public unease about the collecting of more specimens. All three accounts are "court histories", written by those now in charge of the ornithological collection or institution (Gill, Johnstone) or those who established it (Schodde). This makes for a special insight, but also risks loss of objectivity, or solipsism. Schodde's account is the most entertaining, because of his highly personal, trenchant and candid account of the fractious development of the Australian National Wildlife Collection within CSIRO. Schodde marks and laments a generational change at CSIRO, and the loss of a wildlife research culture.

Some of this same ground is covered, with more circumspection, by Ian Rowley in his chapter reviewing the role of CSIRO in Australian ornithology. Rowley demonstrates that CSIRO led research on Australian birds over a golden period from 1947 to the 1980s. It established a scientific standard and a series of long-term studies, initially relating particularly to the interaction of wildlife with agricultural development, but rapidly extending to many other fields of ornithological research. Many of the most important studies were undertaken largely under the official radar of project approval, by a small group of brilliant ornithologists. The CSIRO grouping launched modern ornithology in Australia. As fertile agencies sometimes do, this nucleus attracted a generation of researchers, and their imprint now spans most of Australian ornithology, even if as Rowley notes "in the last 20 years, ornithology became a less important part of the work by CSIRO".

The chapters described above are largely historical accounts of places and people. The remaining two chapters in the book (by Leo Joseph on systematics and biogeography, and by Stephen Garnett and Gay Crowley on conservation) are largely about the development of ideas and science, and hence of more general interest. Joseph provides a highly readable account about the development of understanding of ornithological evolution in Australia. He highlights the change, across a series of false starts, from dry listings of morphological types, viewed from a perspective of northern hemisphere primacy, to a far more exciting evolutionary dynamism marked by recent analytical developments demonstrating Australian origins for many of the world's bird groups. This change represents a radical overhaul of the way we understand our avifauna and its diversity. In this field, knowledge is increasing at a dizzying rate, as new genetic techniques reveal finer and finer layers of taxonomic relationships and evolutionary history, and Joseph reviews with engaging enthusiasm some of the key recent developments in lower level systematics and biogeography for Australian birds. This is an excellent introduction to the field for

those unfamiliar with its contested positions and arcane language and methodologies.

The final chapter is a history of threatened birds in Australia and its offshore islands by Garnett and Crowley. This is an interesting review that includes some original analysis, along with a brief history of the conservation of (and threats to) Australian birds, some conservation case studies highlighting the actions of particular Australians who have contributed to bird conservation, an assessment of historical change in the numbers of threatened birds in Australia, an assessment of future changes in numbers of threatened birds, and an assessment of the effectiveness of bird conservation actions. This chapter provides the best available review of, and context for, threatened birds in Australia. It charts clearly the escalating numbers of threatened (and extinct) birds since (and indeed before) European settlement, as this continent and its ecological fabric has become increasingly modified. It forecasts a continuing or escalating rate of decline.

It demonstrates that conservation actions have had a beneficial impact in preventing some species being lost or declining further, but notes the mis-match between this beneficial effort and the requirements for better management and reduction in threats. The message is that we have the capability to conserve our bird species, but that the resources allocated to the task are way too inadequate, and the way we manage our continent is not consistent with sustaining our avifauna. It is a sobering message, made especially powerful by recognising that today's situation is a consequence of the past and is a determinant of the future. Such contextualisation is what makes the writing of history important, and serves to provide an important rationale for books such as this.

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