

## Book reviews

### THE OWLS OF AUSTRALIA: A FIELD GUIDE TO AUSTRALIAN NIGHT BIRDS

By Stephen Debus

2009. Published by Envirobook, Canterbury, NSW, Australia. 105 pp., colour photographs, colour illustrations, line drawings. Paperback, \$22.95, ISBN 9780858812222.

Undertaking research on owls is filled with many challenges, the most obvious being working on cryptic species in the dark. Trying to identify species can be very difficult, especially if your observations are based on the silhouette of a non-vocal owl roosting high in the canopy where its size is difficult to estimate through the foliage. If you are lucky this silent flier will do a fly-by over your head, or better still, call to a mate, giving you the chance to identify it. In many situations, however; the owl will not be so obliging and will remain silent in its roost, leaving you to wonder: was it a masked owl or maybe a sooty owl or possibly a barn owl?

*The Owls of Australia – a field guide to Australian night birds* by Stephen Debus will certainly help with these owl identification problems. This field guide provides a concise summary of Australia's different owl species, focussing primarily on the identification and basic biology of individual species. The guide begins with a generic chapter on owls and then provides separate chapters for the two owl families and within these chapters sections on the Australian owls that fall within each family. This field guide also contains a chapter on the identification of frogmouths, which is helpful as frogmouths are often misidentified as owls.

The opening chapter of this guide provides a very useful overview of owls, including information about their taxonomy and the characteristics of the two owl families found in Australia, the *Tytonidae* (barn owls) and the *Strigidae* (hawk owls). This chapter also provides an overview of food and hunting, behaviour, reproduction, handling and studying owls, distribution, threats and conservation and finishes with nomenclature and species limits. Chapter two provides a brief overview of owls in the fossil record.

Chapters three and four provide relevant information about each owl species found in Australia. Chapter three represents the hawk owls (genus *Ninox*). There are separate sections for each of the five *Ninox* owls found in Australia (Powerful Owl, Rufous Owl, Barking Owl, Southern Boobook and Christmas Island Hawk-Owl) under the headings: *Description and voice, Distribution, Food and hunting, Behaviour, Breeding, and Threats and conservation*. The same format is used for the barn owls (genus *Tyto*) in chapter four which includes all five species of *Tyto* found in Australia (Sooty Owl, Lesser Sooty Owl, Masked Owl, Eastern Barn Owl and Eastern Grass Owl).

The information provided for each species is concise and well written. The format makes this field guide easy to use and the explanations of the differences between similar species will definitely make correct owl identifications more likely. Coloured plates of each species are also included in the guide. These plates depict both adults and juveniles with a combination of roosting and flying birds, further highlighting differences between species.

Information about frogmouths (genus *Podargus*) is found in chapter five. This chapter contains an overview of frogmouth characteristics and highlights the differences between owls and frogmouths. The Tawny Frogmouth, Papuan Frogmouth and Marbled Frogmouth are all described with information about the distribution and habitat of each species. The inclusion of this chapter will help dispel the misbelief that frogmouths are owls.

This field guide concludes with a chapter about threats, conservation and the future. Debus highlights the pressures faced by Australian owls such as habitat destruction, pesticides and pollution and persecution. He also discusses research and management, reserves, habitat restoration and enhancement, pest management, education, rehabilitation and the future. This chapter is a neat summary of human interactions with these species. It reinforces the ecological and social importance of Australian owls and suggests areas where future research and conservation should be focussed.

Overall, *The Owls of Australia – a field guide to Australian night birds* is a must-have field guide for any owl enthusiast. This guide is concise (106 pp.) and easy to use with all the Australian owls included and the differences between these species are highlighted. The guide is well referenced and also contains a short glossary of key terms. I have no hesitation in recommending this guide as essential for anyone venturing out at night to study owls.

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### THE HANDBOOK OF THE BIRDS OF THE WORLD. VOLUME 14: BUSH-SHRIKES TO OLD WORLD SPARROWS

Edited by Josep Del Hoyo, Andrew Elliot and David A. Christie  
2010. Published by Lynx Edicions, Barcelona. 893 pages, 50 col plates, 500 col photos, 484 maps. Hardcover, \$430.00, ISBN-13: 9788496553507.

The *Handbook of the Birds of the World (HBW)* project began with the publication of the first volume, 'Ostrich to Ducks', in 1992 and the final instalment, Volume 16 'Tanagers to New World Blackbirds', is expected in 2011. The 14th volume of the *HBW* covers 17 passerine families of which all but eight have representatives in Australia. Featured families range from familiar families with speciose cosmopolitan distributions such as the old world sparrows (Passeridae), starlings (Sturnidae) and crows and allies (Corvidae) to range-restricted species-poor families such as the monotypic Bornean Bristlehead (Pityriaseidae: *Pityriasis gymnocephala*), the New Zealand Wattlebirds (Callaeidae) and Stitchbird (Notiomystidae: *Notiomystis cincta*) and the African Oxpeckers (Buphagidae).

This volume holds particular relevance for Australian ornithologists as it includes detailed treatments of several charismatic Australo-Papuan and Australasian corvid passerine families, namely the Grallinidae (mudlarks), Struthideidae (Australian mudnesters), Artamidae (woodswallows),

Cracticidae (butcherbirds and allies), Ptilonorhynchidae (bowerbirds) and Paradisaeidae (birds-of-paradise), which have been authored by some prominent Australian ornithologists including Ian Rowley and Eleanor Russell (Australian mudnesters, woodswallows and butcherbirds) and Clifford and Dawn Frith (bowerbirds and birds-of-paradise). Notable taxonomic changes for Australian taxa included in Volume 14 are the placement of the White-winged Cough (*Corcorax melanoramphos*) and the Apostlebird (*Struthidea cinerea*) alone in the Struthideidae, and the placement of the Australian Magpie (*Cracticus tibicen*) in *Cracticus* with the Butcherbirds instead of in its own monotypic genus *Gymnorhina*, as foraging adaptations were not considered adequate justification for a generic-level designation (*sensu* Christidis and Boles 2008).

An attractive feature of the *HBW* is that its treatments of bird families and species are geared towards both professional and non-professional ornithologists. The literature reviews for each family on aspects as diverse as 'systematics', 'status and conservation', 'voice', 'habitat' and 'relationship with man' are adequately but not prohibitively detailed, and are accompanied by a suite of fantastic photos chosen to illustrate the spectrum of morphological diversity, nesting, feeding and calling behaviour exhibited by members of the family. Informative captions that highlight important elements in the text accompany the photos; thus readers who are short on time will still be able to gain an appreciation of featured families without reading the full family accounts (e.g. the account of the Corvidae was 72 pages long!). Species accounts are provided for each species, including distribution maps, exquisite colour plates illustrating inter- and intraspecific variation and brief texts covering 'Taxonomy', 'Subspecies and distribution', 'Descriptive notes', 'Habitat', 'Food and feeding', 'Breeding', 'Movements', and 'Status and conservation'. These accounts stand alone and are not necessary to gain an appreciation of the evolutionary relationships and behavioural traits of the family.

One of the main advantages of the *HBW* results from the sheer enormity of the project. That detailed information on subjects as diverse as taxonomy, behaviour and identification are collated in a single resource for every species and family of bird in the world, represents a substantial advantage for families that are both speciose and widespread such as the Corvidae (crows) and Dicuridae (drongos), which are both covered in Volume 14. Without *HBW* numerous regional field guides would often need to be consulted in order to develop an understanding of the range of diversity present in such families. For this reason the *HBW* series provides an essential resource for Australo-Papuan birds as it offers the first all-inclusive resource on general life history, field identifications and evolutionary history for many of the species, genera and families that have members on both landmasses. Australian, Papua New Guinean and Indonesian West Papuan birds are typically covered in separate taxonomic reviews, handbooks and field guides. For example, Christidis and Boles' *Systematics and Taxonomy of Australian Birds*, Higgins *et al.*'s *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand, Antarctic Birds (HANZAB)* and Schodde and Mason's *Directory of Australian Birds* all represent excellent sources of material for Australian birds, but offer only a cursory treatment of the New Guinea taxa that are often more closely related to Australian taxa than some Australian taxa are to each other.

Personal highlights in this volume include the account of the radiation of the Malagasy vangas (Vangidae), which have been circumscribed to an amazing 15 species in 12 genera. The authors suggest that the diverse array of morphological and behavioural adaptations of the Vangidae 'may surpass that of Darwin's finches (Emberizidae) or Hawaiian honeycreepers (Drepanididae)' as an example of adaptive radiations to diverse environmental niches on remote islands. Another favourite is the account of the tumultuous taxonomic history of 'one of the strangest members of all the oscines' by Fred Sheldon and Robert Moyle. The Bornean Bristlehead (*Pityriasis gymnocephala*) is best known for its peculiar head bristles, which are actually protrusions of skin, not modified feathers. Its scientific name, perhaps unflatteringly reflecting this characteristic, roughly translates to 'suffering from dandruff' and 'bald-headed'. Lastly, the plates and photos in the family and species accounts of the birds-of-paradise and the bowerbirds by Clifford and Dawn Frith offer a fantastic showcase of the spectrum of morphological diversity and courtship and mating behaviours exhibited in these two amazingly diverse Australo-Papuan centred avian radiations. These birds are always guaranteed to amaze.

The only major issue I had with this volume was the incomplete picture given for the evolutionary history of the assemblage of shrike-like birds, which includes a diverse range of families scattered across several continents, such as the bush-shrikes (Malaconotidae), helmet-shrikes (Prionopidae) and wattle-eyes (Platysteiridae) in Africa, vangas (Vangidae) in Madagascar, Ioras (Aegithinidae), flycatcher-shrikes (*Hemipus*), wood-shrikes (*Tephrodornis*) and the Bornean bristlehead (Pityriaseidae) in south-east Asia and the woodswallows (Artamidae) and butcherbirds (Cracticidae) in Australasia. Higher and lower-order taxonomic placements of the group have been a matter of debate. Revisions have placed most families with the Corvidae (crows), Laniidae (true shrikes), Campephagidae (cuckoo-shrikes and allies) or the Muscicapidae (old world flycatchers). Numerous molecular studies (e.g. Barker *et al.* 2004; Fuchs *et al.* 2006; Moyle *et al.* 2006) have now clarified these higher-order uncertainties and recognise this diverse group of birds as each other's closest relatives. Unfortunately, not all families now recognised to belong to the shrike-like assemblage are covered in Volume 14. Others are instead placed in other volumes according to previous taxonomic order (e.g. Iora, Aegithinidae, in Volume 10 and the wattle-eyes and batises, Platysteiridae, in Volume 11). Furthermore, though the family accounts recognise the inclusion of several new members (e.g. molecular data ally *Newtonia* with the Vangidae rather than old-world Sylviidae or Muscicapidae), these taxa have not been added to the official species accounts section of the family in Volume 14, nor do they cite the volume and page number where these taxa have previously been covered. Realistically, the publication of new papers will make many taxonomic classifications used in *HBW* out of date and it would be a huge task to provide an appendix or gazette of all new taxonomic revisions, however, it does seem a shame not to publish up to date taxonomic treatments for the focal groups of new volumes.

Volume 14 is highly recommended for Australian ornithologists as it covers some prominent Australo-Papuan

members of the corvoid passerines and maintains the high quality presentation and content that the *HBW* series has become known for. Also of interest is the featured 'Foreword', 'Birding past, present and future – a global view' by Stephen Moss, which discusses the development of birding from the activity of a 'few eccentric enthusiasts' around 100 years ago to the 'mass-participation leisure activity' it is today. Key topics include the hunting and collecting ethos that drives the practice of twitching and listing, how the establishment of bird protection societies has promoted birding culture, how the economic value of birding and the ease of global travel has revolutionised the way people 'bird' and how climate change in the 21st century might affect bird distributions and birding worldwide. It is a recommended read for all avid twitchers.

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