

## Book reviews

### FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF AUSTRALIA 8TH EDITION

By Nicholas Day and Ken Simpson

2010. Published by Viking (Penguin Books), Camberwell, VIC, Australia. 382 pp., 132 colour plates, 1000 b/w line illustrations, distribution maps. Paperback, \$39.95, ISBN 9780670072316.

It's all about the pictures. You can write sparkling descriptions and draw flash maps but at that critical moment when you are trying to identify a bird that you don't recognise, it's all about the picture. And these days in Australia, truth be told, we are pretty spoilt. Anyone who has travelled India with the *Pictorial Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* (Ali *et al.* 1983) would not complain about any one of the field guides available in Australia. And anyone who has ever visited a new country with a guide without pictures is pretty pleased to have any illustrations.

The Eighth Edition of Simpson and Day's guide to Australian birds performs the basic function of illustrating and describing Australian birds wonderfully well. When you think about all the information that this single volume contains; starting with the vast collective effort of birdwatchers paid and unpaid, decisions about what to include and what to leave out, and most importantly: drawing the pictures; it truly is a wonderful piece of work. And so it should be, because for all of us, from Emeritus-professor to casual layman, our experience of birds, the knowledge we accumulate of them, our ability to contribute to the collection of data and the decisions that our community makes for conservation and sustainable development are all mediated by the guides we use. Field guides are living documents, reflecting just as much the passion and energy of Australian bird enthusiasts as they do the work of the dedicated and brave souls willing to risk the fusillade of criticism that surely follows the publication of any document intended for such an opinionated and argumentative constituency as the ornithologists. As this guide generously states in the preface, Australian birders should enjoy the luxury of four high-quality works.

So what is it that makes Simpson and Day special? The biggest positive of this guide is the attempt to include all the forms of Australian birds. The variation in plumage as a result of sex, age, season and location is a complex and fascinating feature of birds and full coverage is desirable. Another feature of this guide, vital for furthering knowledge, is the illustrated vagrant bird list. Although I am not personally a fan of the 'I saw a bird out of its range' style of bird appreciation, without such a list the accumulation of knowledge about rarer species from sparsely populated regions of Australia will progress very slowly. Some listed vagrants may not actually be vagrant and of course change is inevitable. The other thing that I really like is the detailed distribution maps. Considering the competition for space in a comprehensive field guide, some of the information in the maps is a bit difficult to extract but nonetheless (up to a point), more is more. The point where more is less is when the book is too cumbersome to carry around. I like walking and I could

cut 100 pages (25%) out of this book but you cannot of course, have everything.

Tempting as it is to write a mostly adulatory piece, such a piece would not advance the study of Australian birds. So being picky, how, in my opinion, could this guide be improved? First of all, the drawings though very good, are not the pinnacle of work in this field of endeavour. In my opinion, for its coverage of variation and its extraordinary detail in a compact volume, *The Sibley Guide to Birds* (Sibley 2000) is a class above. Sitting down to band a netful of *Dendroica* warblers during their autumn migration gives an appreciation of just how good bird illustrations can be. The Simpson and Day guide does have some awesome plates, such as *Ninox*, *Tyto*, *Artamus*, *Coracina*, *Lalage* and *Myiagra*. However, others, such as *Strepera*, *Arses*, *Monarcha* and some of the *Malurus* species, are low-resolution. When I look at some of the arid-zone taxa that I know well, some of the Cape York species I have banded, or the ACT and southern NSW species that I have recently worked with, I see a number with room for improvement. For example, the contrast in colouring across the back of the Red-browed Treecreeper (*Climacteris erythrops*) is distinctively different from the relatively uniform colouring across the back of the White-throated Treecreeper (*Cormobates leucopheus*), but this difference is not illustrated. Similarly, the light-coloured edging of the flight feathers of the Slaty-backed Thornbill (*Acanthiza robustirostris*), in particular the tertials, is distinctively different from the Inland Thornbill (*Acanthiza apicalis*), but this also is not illustrated. The Redthroat (*Pyrrholaemus brunneus*) has a gizz (general impression of size and shape) similar to the White-browed Scrubwren (*Sericornis frontalis*), but this is not captured. Instead, the birds are depicted in an atypical pose; perching on a branch.

A few other illustrations are misleading. The bellies of the male Rufous Whistler (*Pachycephala rufiventris pallida*) and Grey Shrike-thrush (*Colluricincla harmonica rufiventris*) are too red and so is the overall plumage of the Little Button-quail (*Turnix velox*). The Crested Bellbird (*Oreoica gutturalis*) should be greyer, race *albicauda* of the Grey Fantail (*Rhipidura fuliginosa*) should be lighter and race *rubeculus* of the Grey-crowned Babbler (*Pomatostomus temporalis*) is too dark. The Red-backed Kingfisher (*Todiramphus pyrrhopygia*), Rainbow Bee-eater (*Merops ornatus*), Bourke's Parrot (*Neopsephotus bourkii*), Zebra Finch (*Taeniopygia guttata*) and Major Mitchell's Cockatoo (*Cacatua leadbeateri*) are too gaudy whereas the illustrations of the Swift Parrot (*Lathamus discolor*) and the Catbirds (*Ailureodus* spp.) do not capture their dazzling plumage. I also think the crests of the Shrike-tits (*Falcunculus* spp.) are overemphasised making all the species appear stouter than they are; the male Diamond Firetail (*Stagonopleura guttata*) is out of proportion and the two *Xanthotis* honeyeaters lack detail.

Having said that, I really like the drawings of the Black and Pied Honeyeaters (*Certhionyx niger* and *C. variegatus*), Western Bowerbird (*Ptilonorhynchus guttatus*), Rufous Songlark (*Cyclorampus mathewsi*), White-winged Chough (*Corcorax melanoramphos*) and White-faced Robin (*Tregellasia*

*leucops*). I also appreciate the effort that has been taken to reduce the difficulty separating some quite confusing species such as the Corvids, the Frigatebirds (*Fregata* spp.) and the waders (Scolopacidae). The illustration of the quails (Phasianidae) and button-quails (Turnicidae) flying away from the observer is also an excellent feature because this is how we often see them.

The other big question surrounding field guides is: where to from here? The biggest flaw of the traditional field guide – the unsuitability of the medium of books to depict bird calls and songs – is the most obvious area for improvement. This has already been addressed by applications such as *The Sibley eGuide to Birds of North America* (designed for the iPhone), but greater functionality is foreseeable. As many researchers are abandoning paper survey sheets for GPS-enabled personal digital assistants (PDA-GPS), field guides could go the same way. The GPS function would allow users to access the information based on their location. Furthermore, the digitised field guide could be coupled with a microphone or camera to collect spatially-coded data, so that you could download your records to a central database and upload the latest knowledge. Keeping the battery charged in the field could be annoying but

portable solar panels might be the solution. An electronic future appears inevitable, but in the meantime Simpson and Day is excellent.

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### References

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## PARROTS OF THE WORLD

By Joseph Forshaw, illustrated by Frank Knight  
2010. Published by CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood, Australia, 336pp., 46 colour plates, 375 maps. Paperback, AU\$39.95, ISBN: 9780643100572.

*Parrots of the World* is a gorgeous species account of all 356 species of parrots and their numerous subspecies. Unlike other books with complete species account of parrots, this field guide has a format that enables it to be brought along in the field or when travelling. The idea of a parrot field guide sounds tantalising, but in reality there are few locations in the world where such a guide could serve as more than a valuable supplement to the country-specific guides to birds.

This book is organised to reflect the geographical distribution of genera of parrots so that, supposedly, the species one encounters at a certain location should be located close to each other in the book. This is a good idea, but an impossible one, because species differ substantially in their geographic ranges. Thus, for some locations, such as Costa Rica, the relevant species are still scattered over one third of the book (i.e. within each of the three geographical regions), just like other species guides on parrots.

Within *Parrots of the World*, the illustrations of perched individuals are good, but the excellent illustrations of parrots in flight, both from above and below, are what really set this field guide apart from many country-specific guides. In my experience, parrots are often only seen in flight, so the flight illustrations are crucial for identification. The inclusion of good flight illustrations is the principal reason I would bring this guide next time I go to the tropics to supplement to country-specific field guides. Unfortunately, the colours in some of the

illustrations appear a bit dull compared to the striking colour intensity that I have encountered in the field. For instance, the Brown-hooded Parrots (*Gypopsitta haematotis*) and White-fronted Amazon (*Amazona albifrons*) that I have observed in Costa Rica are much brighter and with much starker colour contrasts on wing patterns than indicated by the illustrations in this book.

The introduction contains a good overview of silhouettes of parrots in flight. However, the silhouette of the amazon species depicts somewhat pointed wings bent backwards; a posture mainly adopted when amazons descend. This is not a common silhouette. The amazons that I have watched in flight generally have rounded and straight wings.

The species descriptions are partitioned in two; one to describe the genus and one to describe the species. The descriptions of the genera are very informative, but they are often located a couple of pages away from the species. Descriptions of species are short. For the Australian species that I am familiar with, the descriptions of the species give useful field characteristics and good hints at the overall appearance and behaviour. However, for the amazons (*Amazona* sp.), parakeets (*Brotogeris* sp.) and conures (*Aratinga* sp.), which I have experience with from Costa Rica, the short descriptions often use species characters such as bill colour, chin or head colour markings and eye rings, which all require close range observation that may not be possible in the field. Other characteristics could have been given more attention. For example, different species have distinctive flight motions and vocal behaviour is especially diagnostic. It would be appropriate for a field guide to describe the overall appearance, movement and vocal characteristics for all species. For instance, the sympatric Orange-fronted Conure (*Aratinga canicularis*) and Orange-chinned Parakeet (*Brotogeris junularis*) can be hard to distinguish at large distances when out of hearing range.

Although flocks are fairly directed in flight, as correctly described in the book, the internal organisations of the flocks differ tremendously between these two species. In flocks of orange-fronted conure, birds rarely change position; whereas flocks of Orange-chinned Parakeets are more like a sack of jumbling tennis balls. It would have been nice if space had been allocated to such field characteristics that could be used at long range.

Despite the potential that vocal behaviour has in field identification, call descriptions are lacking for some species. Furthermore, I find it difficult to recognise which descriptions refer to which calls for White-fronted Amazon, Orange-fronted Conure and Orange-chinned Parakeet, although I have studied these species in the field. Also, the descriptions do not reflect the huge differences in call-type repertoire between these three species, where Orange-chinned Parakeet have few call-types, Orange-fronted Parakeet have more (Bradbury 2003) and White-fronted Amazon have an even larger call repertoire. The call descriptions often lack information on contextual use of the calls i.e. flight calls, aggressive calls, which make the calls descriptions harder to use and distinguish from the descriptions of other species' calls. However, the lack of contextual information may simply reflect that little is actually known about vocal repertoires for many parrot species. In the introduction the author mentions that call descriptions are partly based on published accounts and this approach might account for the ambiguity in call descriptions.

A strong asset of this book is the descriptions of subspecies. For many species the descriptions are supported by illustrations. The known geographic distribution of all subspecies are clearly illustrated on multi-coloured range maps.

For each species a list of similar species is given accompanied by one sentence on the characteristics of each of these similar

species. This can be extremely helpful as some species are difficult to discriminate in the field. The lists of similar species do not always take into account whether the species occur sympatry or not. However, this list might be an asset if dealing with captive parrots, so *Parrots of the World* should also be of interest to aviculturists.

For birders and parrot enthusiasts, the guide also includes a brief list of locations where the species have been seen. Such information are useful for planning bird trips and it is a valuable supplement to the range maps, which can not take the habitat requirement of a species into account.

Parrots of the world illustrate the sad conservation state for this group of birds, as many parrot species are critically endangered. The conservation statuses of species or subspecies are included in the species descriptions. The last couple of pages are devoted to extinct parrot species, which further attest to the need for better protection of many parrot species and their habitats.

Overall *Parrots of the world* is a valuable reference both as a field guide and as a general book on parrot diversity. Both as a birder and a researcher studying parrots I will certainly be using this book myself in the future.

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## Reference

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