

Book review

CONSERVATION OF TROPICAL BIRDS

By Navjot Sodhi, Cagan Sekercioglu, Jos Barlow and Scott Robinson

2011. Published by Wiley-Blackwell, London. 300 pp., colour and black and white photographs, other illustrations and maps. Hardback, \$120.00, ISBN: 9781444334821.

Birds are a spectacular and important component of the world's tropical areas. The tropics support an extraordinarily high proportion of the world's birds (90% of all species: King 1985), including many species of profound evolutionary, cultural and ecological significance: think toucans, macaws, birds-of-paradise, cotingas and cock-of-the-rock, hornbills, pittas, cassowaries and Darwin's finches. Driven by rapid human population growth, poverty and unprecedented levels of resource exploitation, the tropics are the arena of much of the world's most pressing, disturbing and difficult conservation challenges. Birds feature large in the delineation and resolution of these conservation issues, in part because ornithological research has been a pre-eminent component of ecological studies in the tropics but also because birds are a group with particular resonance in the human community. Furthermore, many species of tropical birds have attributes that make them especially vulnerable, such as small ranges, narrow dietary specialisations and habitat specificity, and low reproductive output. Birds will form a high proportion of the casualties if the conservation challenges of the tropics are not resolved.

For these reasons, this book is welcome and timely. A review of these issues is particularly useful because much of the attention devoted to the conservation of tropical birds has habitually been geographically circumscribed, typically with little comparison and linkages made between the ecology and conservation of birds across the tropical areas of different continents. Whether this book achieves such aims, though, is debatable.

To some extent, this book follows logically from the excellent foundation of a recent, more general treatment of tropical conservation issues (Sodhi *et al.* 2007). The more tightly focussed *Conservation of Tropical Birds* allows for a far more detailed compilation and contextualisation of the rich body of research on the ecology and management of tropical birds. The book comprises 10 chapters covering the state of tropical bird biodiversity, effects of habitat fragmentation, extinctions of tropical birds, ecological functions of tropical birds, effects of fire, biotic invasions, harvesting of birds, effects of climate change, migratory birds, and a final chapter on conservation prospects. This is a reasonable canvas, but it seems odd that there is neither a chapter focussing on clearing and habitat loss, nor on the extent and adequacy of conservation reserves and community-driven management initiatives.

Despite the critical importance of the theme of the book, *Conservation of Tropical Birds* suffers from a number of shortcomings. A pervasive problem is the loose definition of tropical birds. The opening chapter doesn't really nail what it is (if anything) that is distinctive about tropical birds and their conservation setting, so it is unclear how tropical birds differ from temperate birds and the extent to which they require a

different conservation response. It is also unclear whether avian ecology and conservation is similar or different across the tropical continents. This lack of discipline permeates the book. Many examples, in several chapters, are actually from temperate areas, often without such being stated or without considering the extent to which they may inform the situation in the tropics. Furthermore, there is no explicit tally of the habitat composition of the tropics, and the default appears to be that the focus is on tropical forests: tropical deserts, savanna, grasslands, wetlands and marine environments are given little attention. For example, 'we do not discuss fire-independent environments (such as deserts), where fire is almost always absent due to the lack of fuel' (p. 111). This is clearly erroneous for such Australian tropical systems as the Tanami Desert, where fire is the major management and conservation challenge.

Some chapters in particular are solid fare to read, giving the impression that they are little digested amalgams of sentences from abstracts from papers with matched keywords. Synthesis and review can and should be more than such regurgitation.

Notwithstanding such shortcomings, many of the chapters provide mostly comprehensive and thoughtful reviews. The chapters on ecological function and on migratory birds are impressive, with the latter providing a powerful reminder that conservation problems in the world's tropics will permeate to temperate areas, and that conservation responses have to be integrated at the international scale. Unfortunately, the final chapter on conservation prospects is perfunctory, providing little insight into what characteristics make for successful conservation initiatives for tropical birds. There is little consideration of where conservation effort is most needed and can be most effectively delivered, and little direction for how conservation effort can be most integrated at the international scale.

Ideas and content are fundamental, but a book's worth may be marred by lack of care in presentation. Unfortunately this edition appears unusually messy, with typographical and grammatical errors throughout. Colour is used for few figures, and many black-and-white figures are almost uninterpretable. In some cases, there is both a black-and-white and colour version of the same picture, presumably an economising measure; this seems particularly daft when the few coloured figures include photographs of predominantly black or black-and-white birds (e.g. Magpie Goose (*Anseranas semipalmata*), House Crow (*Corvus splendens*), Bali Starling (*Leucopsar rothschildi*), Hawaiian Crow (*Corvus hawaiiensis*)).

I liked this book for its attempt to knit information across the World's tropics. However, it is a very inequitable treatment, with particularly pronounced representation from South America, and parts of south-eastern Asia and Africa. The rest of the tropical world is dealt with briefly and without deft touch. It interested me that Australia is given little attention, despite holding a larger tropical area than any country other than Brazil. There are impressively many references cited (~1500), but these include fewer than 10 references to studies in the Australian tropics, and the principal Australasian ornithological and ecological journals are hardly cited. I would like to explore

that apparent imbalance, while seeking not to be blinkered by parochial defensiveness. An obvious reason for the neglect is that none of the authors have apparently worked in the Australian tropics, but that is a trite excuse, as the scientific literature should be universally accessible. Perhaps another factor is that the tropical areas of Australia are less exciting than those of other continents. This may reflect the blessing that Australian tropical areas are under far less pressure than those of other continents, or the humbling reality that avian diversity is far higher in many other tropical areas than in the Australian tropics, or the fear that maybe we do not do such good work here. More generally, it is disturbing for those of us who work in Australia, that so little of the Australian context is scooped up in ostensibly global reviews such as this: as if, to be deemed noteworthy, our situation needs to be presented in the American and English journals. My interpretation is that the book fails in its global aim because of its lacklustre presentation of the Australian tropics, given the size of this region and the distinctiveness of its ecology and conservation context (including its low human population density and high economic status). I think it similarly neglects information about New Guinea, and appears not to have cited the rich South American avian literature written in Spanish and Portuguese.

In summary, this is a book about an important topic. It presents much recent literature across much of the world, and highlights the importance of birds in conservation problems and solutions. It just doesn't do it well enough.

This book forms part of the rich legacy of Navjot Sodhi, whose too-short life ended in 2011. Navjot's prolific ecological studies mostly concerned tropical birds, particularly those of south-eastern Asia, but his passion and extraordinary productivity was focussed extensively and tenaciously on local, regional and global conservation. This particular book may have its imperfections, but Navjot's effect on the conservation of tropical birds is indisputable and profound.

References

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STRAY FEATHERS: REFLECTIONS ON THE STRUCTURE, BEHAVIOUR AND EVOLUTION OF BIRDS

By Penny Olsen and Leo Joseph

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The continent of Australia is bursting with beautiful and unusual bird species, whose distributions span from Australia's tropical rainforests to its hot and dry deserts. *Stray Feathers* is a tribute to

the wonderfully interesting, and at times unique, characteristics of Australia's birds. Many of these features may not be common knowledge to even the most experienced of ornithologists. Admittedly, much of the information presented in this book was new to me, and I must commend the book for sparking my interest in fields of ornithology outside my research specialties. For example, I now know about the 150 cm-long trachea of the Magpie Goose, extending the entire length of the bird's body, and the ability of a male Comb-crested Jacana to carry young to safety by tucking them under his wings. Perhaps the book's most favourable quality is its agenda to urge readers to think outside the box, and to not only observe and admire birds for their beauty or unique behavioural traits, but to question why these qualities may have evolved.

Stray Feathers is assembled in an unusual format. Consisting of 18 chapters covering a range of fields, each chapter is organised as a series of page-long vignettes illustrating an interesting avian trait using Australian birds as examples. Some highlights include a chapter outlining feeding habits, with a description of the almost effortless capture of small prey by the tweezer-like motion of the Grey Phalarope's bill, and a chapter describing tool use, containing a section on the drumming behaviour of the Palm Cockatoo used to attract a mate. Although this type of format clearly demonstrates the great diversity of strategies Australian birds use to cope with particular environmental problems, at times it can be a bit awkward to read because it appears to jump from one unrelated point to another. In addition, it sometimes results in minor repetitions of information throughout different chapters. I believe the shortcomings of this format could have been avoided by including brief introductory and summary paragraphs for each chapter. Instead, the authors include short interludes within the primary text, each expanding on a principal or pattern discussed, and presenting a take home message or an explanation of the bigger picture. Regardless of the personal biases one might have to particular writing styles, one cannot help but be amazed by the quality and breadth of the information found within each page.

Stray Feathers is packed with scientific material, although it is primarily written as a non-scientific text. The authors have limited the use of scientific jargon, creating a book that can be understood and appreciated by amateur birders, students and academics alike. A notable difference between this book and scientific literature is the absence of references to scientific publications throughout text. As an alternative, the authors provide a further reading section at the end of the book where interested readers can look up scientific publications related to the specific topics and examples presented in the book. This format results in a book that can be a very relaxing breath of fresh air for those of us who spend our days reading scientific articles.

Stray Feathers is filled with beautiful, detailed drawings, almost one per page. Most illustrations were drawn by Trisha Wright, and the rest by a handful of artists who are noted in the acknowledgements. I wish to give high praise to these artists, for each drawing wonderfully compliments the text. Even if the text itself was awful, in this case being the complete opposite, anyone with an appreciation of art should buy this book, if purely for the beauty of the illustrations found therein.

Overall, I would recommend this book to be a wonderful addition to bookshelves of all bird lovers and ornithologists. With an overall read time between 5 and 6 hours, and the magnitude of interesting information compacted in the pages of this book, *Stray Feathers* may even be sufficient to

stimulate an admiration of the diversity of avian adaptations in those individuals with little interest in ornithology.

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