

Book reviews

PARROTS OF AFRICA, MADAGASCAR AND THE MASCARENE ISLANDS. BIOLOGY, ECOLOGY AND CONSERVATION

By Mike Perrin

2012. Published by Wits University Press, Johannesburg, South Africa. 612pp., colour photographs, tables and diagrams. Hardback, AU\$144, ISBN: 9781868145522.

The world's parrots have been the subject of many fine monographic works. One recalls Lear's (1832) grand, illustrated work; Finsch's (1867) monograph; and, more recently, Joseph Forshaw's superb works (Forshaw 1989, 2006) magnificently illustrated by William T. Cooper and Frank Knight. So, too, the parrots of Australia have been a focus of closer study through Forshaw's monographic lens and also illustrated by Cooper (Forshaw 2002). Neotropical parrots have been reviewed in various regional guides and reference books (e.g. Hilty 2003), and there is a monograph on Colombian parrots (Rodríguez-Maheca and Hernández-Camacho 2002). Finally, the parrots of the African region are now the subject of this major new monograph by Professor Mike Perrin. Illustrated in abundance, the book is a synthesis of the steady stream of research that Professor Perrin has initiated and steered as it grew in the last 20 years. The book is data-rich but highly readable. This body of work is all the more notable because it has been built from a foundation of little more than scattered natural history notes and taxonomic work. The research reviewed in this book has also responded to the sometimes urgent conservation pressures being experienced by some African parrots.

The book's geographical scope is the continent of Africa; Madagascar, and the Mascarene Islands (which comprise Mauritius, Reunion and Rodrigues); and the Seychelles and Comoro Islands. The living parrot fauna of this region comprises members of the genera *Psittacus*, *Poicephalus*, *Agapornis*, *Coracopsis* and *Psittacula*. The book includes several remarkable extinct species known from fragments of data such as museum specimens and writings of early European visitors: Mascarene Parrot (*Mascarinus mascarinus*), Rodrigues Parrot (*Necropsittacus rodericanus*), Broad-billed Parrot (*Lophopsittacus mauritianus*), Reunion Ring-necked Parakeet (*Psittacula eques*), Seychelles Parakeet (*P. wardi*), Newton's Parakeet (*P. exsul*), Thirion's Grey Parrot (*P. bensoni*) and Reunion Grey Parrot (*P. cf. bensoni*). These species are mostly illustrated by a painting or photograph of a specimen, but a few such as *P. exsul* have neither.

The book's many and diverse illustrations bring a uniqueness to avian monographs and must be lauded here. There are photographs of living individuals of every extant species but one, the Niam-Niam Parrot (*Poicephalus crassus*), which is illustrated by photographs of specimens. This impressive array of photographs admirably illustrates the birds and their lives. The in-flight shot of a Ruppell's Parrot on the front cover is justifiably reproduced across two pages with no text mid-way through the book. Having no experience of African parrots in the wild, I feel that the photos have given me an advance insight into the birds' lives that richly compliments the same role performed by the text. Mostly, the photographs are by Cyril Laubscher. His tenacity, diligence and persistence can only be imagined. Several other photographers

have contributed equally remarkable shots. Heinz Lambert is foremost among these. Further to the pictures, the book is illustrated throughout by tables and diagrams that have been meticulously and extensively redrawn from the primary research papers in which they appeared. An attractive signature colour scheme is used for them and they lend further a uniqueness and style to the book. Sadly, such generosity has not been extended to the reproduction of the few genetic and phylogenetic analyses that are available for the African and Mascarene parrots (Chapter 3). In comparison, Fig. 3.3 is an attractive illustration of a biogeographical hypothesis for *Agapornis* lovebirds. Finally concerning illustrations here, a later edition might include a much-needed map of the region under study either on the endpapers or at the beginning.

An introductory chapter reviews the basics of parrot biology and evolution and the group's diversity in the African region. An element of taxonomic heterogeneity enters here because the omission of several species of Asian and Indian *Psittacula* is dictated by the geographical scope. Should a later edition expand to include all *Psittacula*? This may open the door to the complication of including other Asian genera such as *Loriculus*. Perhaps this is not such a bad idea anyway.

A chapter follows on the conservation biology of the region's parrots. This introduces the reader to key research into the effects of deforestation, poaching and trade on the birds' persistence. This section summarises exemplary studies of several species such as Fischer's Lovebird (*Agapornis fischeri*). A brief chapter then reviews scant work on molecular systematics of the region's parrots. This highlights how much remains to be done, especially at the intraspecific level, by using recent methods for estimating diversity within as well as between species.

The next several hundred pages comprise what to me is the book's heart and distinctiveness – a major synthesis of the work of Professor Perrin, his students and colleagues – into the behaviour, breeding biology, diet and trade in African parrots. One chapter reviews the excellent work on the Cape Parrot (*Poicephalus robustus*). The breadth and thoroughness of this research will likely stand as a landmark in parrot conservation biology. It ranges from addressing an initial need to clarify taxonomy, through to the detailed teasing apart of the bird's biology and interaction with environment and humans. Anyone interested in conservation biology of long-lived birds or of parrots in particular would do well to be familiar with the body of work reviewed here.

Nearly 200 pages then give species-by-species accounts of the region's parrot fauna. A later edition would benefit from legends accompanying distribution maps. Maps for species having multiple subspecies show different colours for the different subspecies, but sadly no legend tells us which colour goes with which subspecies. The map for Meyer's Parrot (*Poicephalus meyeri*) is particularly bewildering. Further, the Congo African Grey and Timneh African Grey Parrots (*Psittacus erithacus* and *P. timneh*) have distributions illustrated with the same map.

Professor Perrin and his productive group of researchers and colleagues have led the way in bringing solid science to the conservation and management of African and Mascarene parrots. It has been wonderful to watch this research appear in the literature as well as see Professor Perrin report his work at international meetings. Professor Perrin's vision and clear leadership has now

produced this fine synthesis. More broadly, Professor Perrin's work has helped inform a challenging area for conservation generally, that of long-lived birds. Professor Perrin has done a superb job not only for the African birds (and mammals) he's worked on but, I am sure, for the people and communities whose lives ultimately can only be enriched by having these wonderful species around. This book really does highlight how science and scientists help and enhance our own communities into the future.

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AUSTRALIAN BIRD NAMES: A COMPLETE GUIDE

By Ian Fraser and Jeannie Gray
2013. Published by CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne, Australia.
352pp., black and white illustrations.
Octavo paperback, AU\$49.95, ISBN: 9780643104693.

It's hard to know whether to laugh or cry when confronted by the panorama of Australian birds' names. Fortunately, Fraser and Gray have opted to laugh, and so this scholarly reference work is also an enjoyable read. In a painstaking synthesis of history, linguistics, science and some psychology, they present us with a wide-ranging list of Australian bird names, the history of each name (family, genus, species), and its meaning, as far as they can ascertain it, in both common and scientific names.

The book begins with a brief introduction to where the names come from – their main languages of origin (British, Indigenous and others) and the two main groups of protagonists in naming the birds: the ornithologists (key individuals are granted a short biography), and the 'colonists' – who are, in effect, the public, or nearly everyone else (non-ornithologists). Readers may well need to decide which group they identify with, as the urge to take sides in some of the ensuing debate is almost irresistible.

The omission of the Indigenous people, who were our first ornithologists, from this debate is significant. The book is best regarded as a history of common (English) and scientific names for Australian birds, with some reference to Indigenous names.

Why does the naming of birds evoke such interest, if not outright passion? For a start, as Fraser and Gray make abundantly clear, bird names often do not identify a bird's specific features to distinguish it from similar species. The book also describes, for nearly every species, an ongoing process of names changing. Apart from serious taxonomic research, which has been particularly strenuous recently in shifting birds into and out of taxa, authors and publishers, bird-lovers, and the general public (often grouped into geographic regions), are all active in changing what we call a particular bird. Even a Victorian premier (Jeff Kennett) stars briefly, for his introduction of the name 'Trumped-up Corella' for the Orange-bellied Parrot.

Whether local prejudice, long usage, media exposure or sheer ignorance is at play, feelings can run high. After all, the botanists

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created an international incident over the renaming of the *Acacia* genus (Kull and Rangan 2012).

Thus, such a work as Fraser and Gray's is particularly important. It throws light on the contested terminology, it clarifies who or what is responsible for the present plethora of possible names, and lets you choose (should you be disposed to be rational) on what grounds you will go the grave defending your choice of name!

Fraser and Gray take a laidback and bemused approach to all this sound and fury. There are reasons, often enough, for the names proposed currently, which they explain patiently, but they are not necessarily very convincing reasons (and, with a sly aside, the authors sometimes make it clear they're not convinced). More importantly, they expose the whole confusing process we are all engaged in – if we buy into these debates – and some of the factors that make for a 'successful' name-change, should you wish to influence the naming process.

For example, though it's not very useful, the book tells us five of the six influential early ornithologists in Australian bird names were called 'John' (Latham, White, Lewin, Gould and Leach). Make of that what you will. More to the point, for those of us who've lived through one or more major name shifts, Fraser and Gray detail the authorities responsible (e.g. Royal Australian Ornithologists Union 1913, 1926; Christidis and Boles 1994, 2008). This gives refreshing depth and perspective to those species that seem to appear and disappear in the bird lists with the bewildering random movements of a foraging group of thornbills and warblers.

Scholarship and research are evident on every page, and the book includes further references to follow especially intriguing stories, unfinished dramas or ancient myths. Fraser and Gray write with skill and charm, and we get many glimpses of fascinating scientists, personality clashes, famous and obscure individuals, ancient Greek or Roman ornithology, innumerable gods and goddesses, and those interminable nomenclatural struggles that beset the history of any taxonomy.

Like any good book, this 'complete guide' opens more doors than it shuts. One tantalising question that keeps circling is: who has the right to rename a bird? The book never answers this question, but it looks like it takes at least two to tango – someone has to propose a change and someone else has to agree or disagree. The first person is often an ornithologist and the second party is that vague entity 'the general public' or, more precisely, the birdwatching community.

Even when the majority of readers accept a change, local groups can often stage a breakaway movement. When I was in rural New South Wales in the 1980s, to talk of a 'Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike' with some individuals got me nowhere – but 'Blue Jay' rang bells.

Many other questions beckon. How much weight should we give to each of the two protagonists, the specialists and the general public? Can we be gracious enough to accept local variations? (Should people in Tasmania have to call a Tasmanian endemic a 'Tasmanian Robin'?) In a postcolonial society like Australia, what messages are encoded in our bird names? Do they 'colonise' and standardise a shimmering mosaic of local Indigenous names? Given the underlying role onomatopoeia seems to play in so many bird names (another book in itself!), what role do the birds play in naming themselves for us? Fraser and Gray make clear that many of our 'old' European names (such as 'crane' or 'knot') were also originally onomatopoeic.

The authors regret the 'sad situation' whereby we use very few bird names of Indigenous Australian origin (p. vii). Their main authority for such names seems to be *Macquarie Aboriginal Words* (Thieberger and McGregor 1994), but they often admit their own ignorance as to which Aboriginal language an Indigenous name comes from.

The pity is that now (2013) there is a wealth of works on local Aboriginal languages (at least ten recent books in New South Wales alone, referenced in Wafer and Lissarrague 2009) that provide a lot more detail than *Macquarie Aboriginal Words* – and answer some of Fraser and Gray's questions. For example, the name Buln Buln for the Australian Ringneck parrot that Fraser and Gray state (p. 140) is from 'an Indigenous language, but we don't know which one' can be found in Gamilaraay (also spelt Kamilaroi) as Bulun Bulun (Giacon 2013, p. 265). Similarly, Ban Ban Dhuluwi for the Crested Bellbird (which they ascribe, as 'Bunbundalui', to an unknown 'north-central NSW' Aboriginal language, p. 230), is a Gamilaraay name (Giacon 2013, p. 265).

Where the authors of such dictionaries are themselves accomplished birdwatchers (for example, Morelli 2008, and Giaccon in Ash *et al.* 2003) and rely on accurate informants (such as Uncle Ted Fields of the Yuwalarraay), there is an even better chance of undoing some of the damage done by scribes recording Aboriginal bird names in earlier times. [The Reverend Ridley, recording Gamilaraay in the mid-nineteenth century (Ridley 1866), betrayed an abysmal ignorance of local birds!]

If, as Goddard (1981) argues, most Australian Indigenous words for birds are onomatopoeic, there is a ready ground for some agreement on names that spring directly from the birds' calls. Allowing for different phonological systems, and the resulting spelling confusions, we may yet move to such mellifluous terms as Dhirri-dhirri for the Willie Wagtail or Birru-Birruu for the Rainbow Bee-eater (both from Gamilaraay). To strengthen the hand of local groups, each part of Australia would yield its own local Indigenous names, with the bird speaking its own name, as it were, in local lingo. Surely there is room for local usage and local pride, among the various functions bird names have for us.

The scientifically inclined might well weep at such fragmenting of what they would see as an attempt, through names, to describe a sweeping ongoing evolutionary process of species formation. To thoroughgoing taxonomists, bird names should reflect relationships – genetic relationships. They might dream of a day when 'artamids' and 'malurids' will drip from our tongues, as easily

as 'currawongs/magpies/butcherbirds/woodswallows' and 'wrens'. But from Linnaeus onwards, as Fraser and Gray make clear, what may sound simple at family level, is horribly muddled at genus and species level. Should we seek a common term (a 'surname') for each genus, even if the splitters and lumpers were to leave the genera alone long enough for a genus name to gain some traction? Would magpies become 'Ground Butcherbirds' for example, now that they share a genus (*Cracticus*) with the butcherbirds, and shed their pseudo-European links with the crow family?

Although Fraser and Gray pour scorn on most of the clumsy composites those hapless 'colonists' in Australia yielded (such as crow-shrike, cuckoo-falcon, shrike-thrush), in the ongoing quest to describe these new birds, I'm more sympathetic. It seems to me 'shrike-thrush' as a term deliberately links two unlike species, because the bird is neither, yet evokes aspects of both. That's as poetic a process as any. (I agree with them, though, that 'bullfinch-jay' for the White-winged Chough is rather stretching credulity.) Who, in the streets of Sydney or Perth, could identify a new bird family every time one popped up? Let's be honest – the professional ornithologists have arrived very late (two centuries late) at recognising the extreme age and originality of many Australian bird families. They also fell into the trap of 'Europeanising' their taxa. Should we go further and find an Indigenous name for those groups that are now acknowledged as 'old endemic' families', such as honeyeaters, lyrebirds, shrike-thrushes, wrens and thornbills?

Whereas the scientist may dream of the day when we all use scientific names and nothing else [and Gould (1848) came perilously close with his Wattled Tallegalla for the Brush Turkey and *Regulus*-like *Acanthiza* for the Buff-rumped Thornbill], the legalists will accept only the latest authoritative scientific pronouncement and the iron-clad rules of nomenclature. This may satisfy them, but it leaves the rest of us hostage to the latest change, and cuts us off from the rich history of bird naming in Australia.

I have a few quibbles with Fraser and Gray. For clarity, I think the scientific name should be provided immediately beside the common name for each species in the list, as well as where the scientific name is explained. I also find their attempts to translate the scientific name maddeningly inconsistent, especially as they explain that the species name is either an adjective or a noun in apposition. For example, they translate *Calidris tenuirostris* (Great Knot) as 'speckled slender-billed water-bird', whereas they should call it 'slender-billed speckled water-bird' to be consistent with their earlier translation of *Calidris* as a 'speckled water-bird'.

Finally, a very minor quibble: the authors omit 'BFCS' (pronounced 'bufcus') from alternative names for the Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike. This is a genuine Australian coinage, in the great tradition of acronyms such as ANZAC and QANTAS. What's more, to the delight of those who enjoy linguistic rules being broken, it's a rare case in Australian English of the schwa (that little 'uh' sound we tend to put in for many unaccented vowels) occupying an accented syllable.

The lists are broken by charming black and white illustrations from Diggles (1877), selected for their 'beauty, accuracy of observation and quirkiness' (p. vi). These three adjectives are not a bad summary of their whole book. Thorough scholarship (accuracy), entertaining style (definitely quirky) and a thoughtful look at the engrossing and ongoing work of naming our birds, which, as a process, has its own rugged beauty.

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BIRDS AND PEOPLE

By Mark Cocker and David Tipling

2013. Published by Jonathon Cape, London. 592pp., many full colour photographs.

Hardback, AU\$100, ISBN: 9780224081740.

The relationships between birds and people are complex and endlessly fascinating. Birds feature universally as symbols, icons and even deities, as well as more prosaically as logos and trademarks. They are esteemed for their perceived wisdom, feared for their spiritual malevolence and even mere glimpses are treasured as trophies. Most of us are almost certainly aware of some of these traits valued by other cultures or world-views, but our knowledge is likely to be fragmentary or peripheral, however interested we may be. This is only to be expected: the world is a big place, birds are everywhere and time is limited; how could anyone ever hope to survey the birds of the entire planet and document the myriad ways they are viewed and used? This was the daunting challenge author Mark Cocker was willing to accept; although admittedly, he did have 650 assistants from 81 countries to help!

'This is an unusual bird book, in that it is as much about human beings as it is about birds.' Mark Cocker's opening sentence of this monumental work is no understatement; indeed, *unusual* barely prepares the reader for the scale and diversity of the content within. I would be as bold as to state this is a unique volume even within the seemingly endless universe of bird books. Others have traversed similar terrains but usually on a far more limited scale. *Birds and People* surveys most of the birds of the world, covering 144 families (including two now extinct; those missing are listed on page 536 (well, see if *you* can find something culturally significant about the Aegithalidae), although unfortunately, 19 of these are Australian families. For the rest, the level of detail provided for the group correlates rather straightforwardly with the degree with which the species intersect with human activities.

The largest single section is, unavoidably, devoted to the Phasianidae, the family containing the pheasants, quail, turkeys, grouse and other fowl species. The prominence of this diverse and often spectacular family is significantly, but not entirely due to the presence of a single species – *Gallus gallus*, originally simply the Red Junglefowl – from somewhere in southern Asia but now domesticated into infinite breeds and forms. The bird is now the most numerous on Earth, with at least 12 billion providing humans with our most important source of protein (indeed, more than all the beef, lamb and pork combined). However, beyond the essential facts of food supply and the related commercial activities on a truly global scale, phasianids feature as powerful symbols of, for example, bounty and fertility for both ancient and modern American culture (Wild Turkeys), sporting and sexual prowess (roosters), near-divine extravagance (Indian Peafowl), and of privilege and entitlement (the hunting of certain grouse in Europe). They are also responsible for endless additions to language ('You're chicken', 'Gobbledegook', 'She'll be grouse!'). And that barely scrapes the surface!

Birds and People is big in every dimension, including its geographical, cultural and taxonomic range, as well as its scale and ambition. These traits are matched by the size of the physical object itself: just under 600 pages and 2.6 kg. Entering a creation with this much writing (which is of a crisp yet evocative style, ideally suited to the task of combining scientific rigour with the richness of myth and emotion) is initially a visual sensation. From the arresting images of Himalayan eagle-hunters on the cover, to the Japanese crane feeders a few pages later, it is easy to predict that this is going to be one of those 'long-browse' volumes picked up in the bookshops. Photographer David Tipling (who is deservedly credited as a co-author) has travelled the globe in search of pictures that document the diversity of the relationship between birds and people. The results are spectacular (Snow Geese illuminated by the setting sun, p. 85), moving (the pride of a Kazakh hunter in his Golden Eagle, p. 166), astonishing (an elephant engulfed by a vast swarm of Red-billed Queleas, p. 491) and sometimes

downright distressing (a Peruvian festival involving an Andean Condor tied to a bull, p. 157).

Among the many major achievements of this truly international and trans-cultural project has been the authors' extraordinary success in finding people from everywhere who were willing to expand on and explain the birds of their region. The enthusiasm with which these stories and anecdotes have been shared is evident throughout, and adds substantially to the human-bird relationship Cocker and Tipling are illustrating. As Cocker explains: 'Birds dwell at the heart of human experience, furnishing us with an imaginative resource that is as limitless as their fund of flesh and feathers' (p. 9).

As should be clear by now, this is no simple bird book. By documenting some of the ways our world connects with those of birds, Cocker and Tipling dramatically and seemingly effortlessly expose just how much we need these remarkable creatures. It is indeed at least as much about us it is about them.

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