

Book review

GRASSFINCHES OF AUSTRALIA

By Joseph M Forshaw and Mark Shephard, illustrated by Andrew Pridham

2012. Published by CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne, Vic., Australia. 336 pp., colour illustrations, maps. Hardback, AU \$185.00, ISBN 9780643096349.

Joseph Forshaw and Mark Shephard's *Grassfinches of Australia* is both deep in information and visually stunning. Thanks to the impressive artwork by Anthony Pridham and easy-to-use layout, this book will appeal to a broad audience. It is difficult to compare this book to any other, as it is by far the most comprehensive collection of information exclusively on Australian grassfinches in recent memory. Klaus Immelmann's 1982 revised version of *Australian Finches in Bush and Aviary* has been considered the definitive work on Australian finches for many years, but considering the advances in research and avicultural practices since the 1980s, an update was needed. This publication certainly fills the gap and is sure to become the standard reference work on Australian finches for years to come. The book is dedicated to the late Richard Zann, best known for his work on zebra finches. Zann was an inspiration to many young ornithologists and an internationally respected researcher. Without his work, our knowledge of Australian finches would have been much poorer.

Joseph Forshaw is a well published Australian ornithologist, especially recognised for his reference texts. This extensive list includes books on parrots, kingfishers, birds of paradise and bowerbirds to name a select few. Anyone acquainted with Forshaw's previous work will notice a familiar formula used in the style and layout of this book – a formula that has made many of his previous publications very popular. The publication includes an overview of Australian grassfinches (wild and aviary) followed by chapters dealing with each species individually. As in many of Forshaw's earlier books, the publication also includes a comprehensive section on aviculture for each species. To achieve this, Forshaw has joined forces with aviculturalist Mark Shephard, author of *Aviculture in Australia: Keeping and Breeding Aviary Birds* (2003). Shephard's extensive experience in Australian aviculture is an asset to the book. The text is interspersed by Anthony Pridham's stunningly beautiful paintings. Each species has a full-page painting as well as many smaller paintings and drawings by artist Frank Knight; together, these bring to life many aspects of behaviour described in the text, such as courtship displays. Pridham undertook the enormous task of observing every species and subspecies in its natural habitat before painting it. The result of this dedication is reflected in his paintings, which show birds in their natural habitat, poses and behaviour, and which earned the book a nomination for the 2013 Whitley Award for illustrated zoology.

Walter Boles (from the Australian Museum) provides an excellent foreword in which he gives his personal account of grassfinches, drawing from both his work and life experiences. This is followed by an equally personal preface by Forshaw, which reveals this book as a work of passion based on a lifetime

of experience. The preface also details the layout of the chapters. Following Forshaw's standard for his reference books, the first chapter looks at the systematics of Australian grassfinches. This is followed by a comparative summary of their distribution and movements, behaviour, vocalisations, feeding, breeding and development, and details efforts to conserve finch species throughout Australia. The second chapter, written by Mark Shephard, gives an overview of grassfinches in Australian aviculture. Starting with the history of Australian finches in aviculture (dating back to 1778!), Shephard goes on to discuss how trends have changed over time and details the current status. I was particularly fascinated by the graph depicting prices for each species over time. I am surprised by the relatively steady price of most species (or at least steady increase in price) and wonder how much more this simple diagram can reveal. The rest of this chapter details the general principles of aviary management, including diseases, mutations present in Australia and the role of aviculture in conservation (current and potential). This chapter is essential reading for anyone considering starting out in aviculture.

The following 22 chapters are dedicated to every species of grassfinch with confirmed (current or historical) records in Australia, including on offshore islands. For each species, Forshaw describes in detail the distribution, habitat and status, movements, social behaviour, field notes, diet and feeding, vocalisations, courtship, mating behaviours and nesting. Many of these sections, especially the field notes for each species, contain personal observations made by Forshaw and several finch experts with whom he has consulted, supplemented by unpublished and published accounts. This is both a strength and a drawback of this book. The strength of this approach is that many of these details and personal comments would not otherwise be published and are especially useful for species for which little scientific research has been done. The drawback is that this information is often anecdotal and unrefereed; those wishing to use this text as a reference manual should be aware of this and consider each statement on its own merit. Each chapter is preceded by a full-page painting by Pridham and a small distribution map showing the species' current core and maximum ranges as well as its estimated former range. At the end of each wild species account, Shephard lays out the current knowledge about each bird in aviculture. This includes a thorough detailing of housing compatibility and temperament, feeding, breeding, mutations and hybrids.

The book is intended to be a reference book from which information on each species can be located quickly and easily. To achieve this, the same subheadings are used for every species, which inevitably leads to a certain amount of superfluous information on closely related species. However, for a reference book, this seems preferable to the alternative of having to flick back and forth for information. In saying this, if you (like me) have a short memory, you will need to go back to the preface to check the colour key for the distribution maps. However, by providing both a drawing displaying external features of finches (body parts and feather names) as well as a map of Australia indicating the locations mentioned, the authors ensure that no prior knowledge of finches, of birds, or indeed of Australia is needed to appreciate

this book. The book's simple layout and detailed up-to-date (to 2011) information presented in such an accessible format ensure that it will be an invaluable resource for aviculturists. For broader audiences, the stunning artwork ensures that it would not look out of place on any coffee table and is perhaps worth purchasing for this reason alone.

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