

BOOK REVIEWS

CSIRO List of Australian Vertebrates: A Reference with Conservation Status

M. Clayton, J. C. Wombey, I. J. Mason, R. T. Chesser and A. Wells, 2006
CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood, Vic.
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THIS is the second edition of this very useful list of Australian vertebrates. The first edition was published in 1998 and has been frequently consulted when needing a name or to check my appalling spelling of Latin.

According to the authors, the goals of the first edition were to provide a standardized taxonomy and nomenclature along with distributional and conservation information on Australian vertebrates. The second edition continues with this and provides updated information on taxonomy, nomenclature, distribution and conservation status. While the first edition listed primarily species, among many new features, this edition lists all recognized and named subspecies and extends distributional data to the territories outside the mainland. The list is intended as a "unifying reference tool" for people "working with and publishing on Australia's vertebrate fauna, particularly those dealing in legal matters and environmental inventory and management programmes". I'd be the first to agree that having a standardized nomenclature for the Australian biota is an admirable goal. I've seen too many whimsical name changes in the past 40 years based on poor science and ego not to advocate standardization, but until a list is produced that has been subjected to rigorous (external and independent) peer review, standardization will not be achieved.

I made similar comments when reviewing an earlier CSIRO publication, "The Directory of Australian Birds: Passerines" by R. Schodde and I. J. Mason (1999) (Recher 2001). I found much that was useful in the Directory and continue to refer to it for information and ideas on the birds I study in Western Australia. However, I also said that I was unlikely to accept the revisions recommended in the Directory until they were subjected to critical review. I am therefore concerned to see some of those revisions incorporated into the second edition of the CSIRO List of Australian Vertebrates, again without evidence of the mandatory peer review. While this does not take away from the utility of the CSIRO List, it does mean that users must be critical in their acceptance of particular names. Unfortunately, critical is a rare commodity when it comes to following name changes of the Australian biota, so the authors of lists, such as CSIRO's, must be especially vigilant when nomenclatural changes are advocated and presented to the general community.

Let me give just two examples from the second edition to illustrate my concerns. The first is a simple one and one I actually applaud. The first edition of the CSIRO List gave the English name of *Anthus novaeseelandiae* as "Richard's Pipit" following the ill-conceived and Australophobic list of English names of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU 1978). The second edition reverts to the much better "Australian Pipit" apparently following Schodde and Mason (1999). The second example is a bit more complex, but better illustrates the problems created in the absence of an independent nomenclatural review committee similar to that which guides ornithological nomenclature in North America through the American Ornithologists Union. The first edition of the CSIRO List showed the Crested Shrike-tit *Falcunculus frontatus* as a single species, with three subspecies (*F. f. frontatus*, *F. f. leucogaster* and *F. f. whitei*), an arrangement accepted since 1953 and followed by Johnstone and Storr (2004) for Western Australia where two of the subspecies reside, as well as by Christidis and Boles (1994), which is the currently accepted authority for avian nomenclature in Australia. The second list again appears to follow Schodde and Mason (1999) and elevates the three subspecies to species status. No reason is given for this change, but Schodde and Mason (1999) justify their revision by saying that the "differences" between the subspecies are "more trenchant than previously appreciated, involving proportions of tail and shape of wing as well". What the other differences might be is left to guesswork, but I would not think wing shape and tail proportions necessarily meant anything more than somewhat minor adaptations to local conditions, something which can be seen among vertebrate populations wherever it is investigated. For example, just consider the morphological differences between, say, indigenous people living in the Northern Territory and others living in Arctic Canada. The shrike-tit is a species I am currently researching (Recher 2006) and I cannot see any morphological, behavioural or ecological differences between *F. f. frontatus* and *F. f. leucogaster* to justify separating them as species. Perhaps they are, but the reasons need to be published and subjected to peer review. Until this is done for the shrike-tit and other species where names have been changed, it would be in the interests of a standardized nomenclature, if subsequent revisions of the CSIRO List of Australian vertebrates refrained from making untested and unnecessary name changes. There has been enough of that already in Australia, especially with the ornithological nomenclature.

My criticisms should not detract from what is really a very useful and valuable publication. I appreciate the efforts of the authors; the CSIRO List will continue to occupy rare space on my desk, and I recommend it to everyone needing to check or find the names of Australian vertebrates.

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Status and Conservation of Shorebirds in the East Asian-Australasian Flyway

P. Straw, ed., 2005
 Australasian Wader Studies Group and Wetlands International — Oceania
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THIS publication comprises the proceedings of the Australasian Shorebirds Conference held in Canberra in 2003. It is No. 18 of Wetlands International Global Series and International Wader Studies 17 of the International Wader Study Group. Although publication was delayed, the papers in this proceedings remain an important contribution to international shorebird conservation. Eighteen of the 25 papers are about Australian and New Zealand shorebirds, while the remainder are mainly from Southeast Asia. Topics include managing human disturbance of plovers on Australian beaches, conservation of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Eurynorhynchus pygmaeus* in Russia, shorebird studies in Taiwan, and threats from marine farming in New Zealand.

Shorebirds are a highly threatened group of birds. Many undertake long-distance migrations from breeding grounds north of the Arctic Circle to Tasmania, New Zealand and Patagonia in the Southern Hemisphere. Others nest and feed on beaches which are the preferred breeding, hunting and loafing grounds of large numbers of humans.

Migratory waders rely on wetlands and intertidal habitats along their migratory pathway as place to rest and fatten before flying on. These are also habitats valued by humans as places to find food, including waders. Wetlands and intertidal habitats throughout the world are threatened by development, including dams on the rivers which feed their productivity (e.g., on the Yangtze River), aquaculture, land fill for urban and industrial expansion, and pollution. Loss and degradation of migratory stopover habitats has critical impacts on migratory waders, as does the loss of breeding habitat through development and global climate change.

The future of migratory shorebirds, as for much of the world's biota, is not bright, but some of the most important wintering and migratory areas for these birds are in developed countries, including importantly Australia. Protection of these habitats may not stop overall global decline, but it can mitigate some of the effects of threatening processes north of the continent. Australian conservation biologists need to be informed about the status of migratory waders, and of our own endemic species, the threats they face and the international efforts being made to conserve these birds. This proceedings is an excellent starting point to become informed. It is informative, the papers generally well-written and edited, and the cost (\$25) is small these days for a technical publication.

¹Available from Phil Straw, AWSC, P. O. Box 2006, Rockdale Delivery Centre, New South Wales, Australia 2216; includes packing and postage.

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