

## Threatened Birds of the World

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This magnificent volume begins with the words "Extinction is final." In one of six forewords, Stephen Garnett comments that "Oceania is well used to extinction" with nearly half of all known bird extinctions since 1500 occurring in the region. Russ Mittermeier informs us that the world stands at the opening of one of the great extinction events in planetary history. Not all is despair. James Clements tells us that there are "refreshing rays of light" and cites the reservation of 13 million hectares of rainforest as protected areas. He quotes Peru's Minister of Foreign Relations as saying that "one of the marks of civilization is the regard men bestow on wild things". What then is the state of the world's avifauna: no more authoritative account is available than *Threatened Birds of the World*.

The product of nearly 1 000 contributors, researchers, reviewers, compilers and editors this is a testimony to commitment and concern. All this effort concludes that nearly one in eight (~12%) bird species is at "real" risk of extinction. This is a staggering 1 186 species, 182 of which are critically endangered compared with 128 species known to have become extinct in the last 500 years, 103 of these since 1800. This is an extinction rate 50 times greater than expected from the rate of avian extinctions documented in the fossil record. Birdlife International now predicts that more than 460 species of birds will become extinct this century and the rate is accelerating. As is the case with accelerated global warming, the loss of birds and the accelerating rate of extinction are entirely attributable to human activities: land clearing, logging, hunting, trapping, introduction of exotic plants, animals and diseases are all contributors as humanity changes the world's ecosystems. Not a pleasant story really, but one that needed telling.

By identifying which species are at risk and the processes threatening their survival, Birdlife International provides a framework on which to focus conservation efforts. The main threats to birds are habitat loss and degradation, exploitation and

invasive species. "Unsustainable logging and agriculture are primary causes of endangerment in birds." (P. 8). Action to counter these threats need to be both species specific (surveys, research on ecology and threats, monitoring) and ecosystem-wide (establish and manage protected areas, manage non-protected areas). Management is a key, as many protected areas exist only on paper.

Nearly 600 pages of this 850 page volume is devoted to a species by species account of threatened species. There are 70 pages listing lower risk species in less detail and a seven page obituary of those species already extinct. The final section lists the world's threatened species nation by nation. Australia (excuse me for being parochial) has 61 species against its name and illustrates the conservative approach taken by Birdlife International in reaching decisions on which species to list or not list. My own view is that Australia has already lost significant avian biodiversity and stands to lose half its species in the next 100 years (Recher 1999). Regardless, the differences are academic and the world's birds are in deep trouble.

One of the very good features of *Threatened Birds of the World* is the introductory sections summarizing the state of the world's avifauna and threatening processes, but also giving positive recommendations for action. Perhaps the best of all is the section which explains how to use the book and interpret the species accounts and how to read the maps provided. There is good direction to sources of additional material and nearly 50 pages of references. Not light reading, but, if you have any interest at all in the conservation of biological diversity, you need to be aware of this book and take the time to at least browse through it. Ornithologists and students will find it a compelling document and valuable as a primary source of information on the world's threatened birds. Yes, it is expensive, but count the cost of each species lost and the price of the book is cheap by comparison. *Threatened Birds of the World* belongs on the book shelf of most conservationists and must be in every serious educational library. It is available from specialised book sellers and from Lynx Edicions in Barcelona (Passeig de Gracia, 12, Barcelona, Spain) (the price includes postage and packing).

Recher, H. F., 1999. The state of Australia's avifauna: a personal opinion and prediction for the new millennium. *Aust. Zool.* **31**: 11-27.

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