

Book reviews

PIGEONS AND DOVES IN AUSTRALIA

By Joseph Forshaw and William Cooper

2015. Published by CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne. 360 pp.
Hardback, AU\$185.00, ISBN 9780643096332

The authors are both familiar names in the landscape of ornithological literature in Australia. Joseph Forshaw has authored many popular books on birds, including *Parrots of the World*. He has published books on parrots, kingfishers, birds-of-paradise, bower birds, turacos, trogons and other general books on birds. He is often regarded as a pre-eminent expert on parrots. The late William T. (Bill) Cooper AO (6 April 1934–10 May 2015) was an Australian artist. He achieved renown through his natural history and scientific illustrations, especially those of birds. Sir David Attenborough described Bill Cooper as ‘Australia’s greatest living scientific painter of birds—he is possibly the best in the world’. This quotation has been repeated so often I cannot find where it was originally published. Sir David made a film about him in 1993, called, *Portrait Painter to the Birds*. I wanted to review this book since sadly it must be Bill Cooper’s last.

The book, as the title suggests, is about the pigeons and doves (Columbiformes) in Australia. Despite its outward appearance as a coffee table book, this is an earnest attempt at a reference book on these birds and covers all native and introduced species in Australia. It is fully referenced with Harvard style referencing. Its aim is to be a serious reference book extending on from *Pigeons and Doves of Australia* by Harry Frith (1982); and perhaps Volume 3 of the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds (HANZAB) (Higgins and Davies 1996).

The book is framed in the usual fashion with front end material such as the foreword and other introductory material. These are followed by the species accounts, which are presented in phylogenetic order—though the names do not follow Christidis and Boles (2008). Each species section is a standalone section set-out with the sub-headings: Other Names; Description; Distribution; Subspecies; and General Notes, which in turn has the sub-headings habitats and status (Forshaw apologised at the outset for repeating information in this section for species that share habitats etc.), movements, social behaviour; then Field Notes, which includes diet, feeding, and calls; and then Courtship; Nesting and Aviary Notes.

The species section represents most of the book from page 7 to 300 of 360 pages. A foreword is written by Professor Stephen Davies, a preface by Joseph Forshaw, then two introductions by Joseph Forshaw, which give the plan of the book and general background to the birds; the second introduction is more extensive and includes aviary notes. The species accounts are followed by an appendix covering five vagrant pigeons detected briefly in Australian territories; a gazetteer; the reference section; and finally the index rounds out the book. The layout or organisation of the book facilitates quick research and longer reads if you like. Such organisation does advance the book. The readership addressed by the book is a broad one considering that on one hand the text is authoritative and referenced, while on the

other hand the drawings are of a high standard by a famous artist, Bill Cooper. Thus it seems clear that a wide audience of ‘bird fanciers’ and specialist readers have been targeted. I find myself falling into both categories.

In outlining the strengths of the book I am personally immediately drawn to the beautiful and precise figures of Bill Cooper. Yet I am quickly distracted by the text of Joseph Forshaw, because it is comprehensive. For the most part I will use the text in my day to day work along with the appropriate search engines to sift through the primary literature. Its main strength and function therefore lie in its easy access on my bookshelf and its easy to use style: a point emphasised by Joseph Forshaw in his introduction: he intended it to be an easy to use resource. Harking back to its other strength, Bill Cooper’s paintings, I will be permanently ready to grab the book off my shelf and show its pictures to my daughter as she learns about birds and I will probably point to the detail in the plants and the background landscape and other objects in the paintings, because Bill Cooper always thoroughly painted this detail.

The text is wide reaching in its extent. The book proclaims to be a serious text and it lives up to the claim. When I compared it to Higgins and Davies (1996) HANZAB’s Columbiformes, I found it equalled or bettered this text in many areas. Alas, neither went into any interesting detail on diseases. As an educational resource its pictures will make it a friendly book for secondary students and the text will serve undergraduates, postgraduates and professionals: it thus serves a broad educational niche. The level of research is of a high standard. This is benefitted by Joseph Forshaw’s significant experience with science and with travelling about Australia and the world seeing the birds in their natural habitats and in non-natural habitats. The section on the Rock Dove, *Columba livia*, draws on the author’s experience seeing them nesting naturally in cliffs on the Irish coast and in their congregations in cities, such as Canberra and Sydney. He appropriately adds the work of others to his own understanding and observations. Because he is a very experienced writer of many books he is able to convey scientific correctness with an easy to follow and engaging style. He is also not shy in using tables where these might better convey data.

The quality of the Bill Cooper’s paintings is at the highest level. He captures how the birds appear in their natural setting, the way we are familiar with seeing them. At the same time his attention to feather detail and avian morphology is acute. He does not miss anything by not painting them all facing the same way in an upright position as per the usual guides. Maps showing the species’ distributions are large enough and clearly marked. A welcome addition is the many references, some with pictures, to the early literature on pigeons. An example is the First Fleet artwork, particularly the Watling Drawings; they provide an artistic reference point and an historical reference point.

I would recommend this book to students, researchers and libraries. It could sit in the reference section of local libraries and in university libraries. It will also be a prize possession and a must have for pigeon fanciers and others with a love of birds. According to the author this book will fill a void that has not been filled for thirty years since Harry Frith’s *Pigeons and*

Doves of Australia, published in 1982. I imagine it might be another thirty years until this book is usurped as the leading text on Australia's pigeons and doves.

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TAXONOMY OF AUSTRALIAN MAMMALS

By S. Jackson and C. Groves

2015. Published by CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne. 512 pp.
Hardback, AU\$160 ISBN 9781486300129

Dr Stephen Jackson is a Research scientist at the NSW Department of Primary Industries and an adjunct Senior Lecturer at the University of New South Wales. He was the winner of the 2004 Whitley Medal for *Australian mammals: biology and captive management* (Jackson 2003). He obtained his PhD from James Cook University and has since had extensive experience working with and publishing on mammals: this is his sixth book. Dr Colin Groves is Professor of Biological Anthropology at the Australian National University. He works primarily on mammalian taxonomy and phylogeny, mainly on ungulates, primates and carnivores, and has published occasionally on monotremes, marsupials and rodents.

This book is a reference text to be used by taxonomists and systematists. It is a comprehensive checklist that provides a complete list of scientific and common names for all Australian mammals. It aims to: present a full and up-to-date list of all Australian mammals; provide complete taxonomic histories (synonymies); indicate a name's stability through historic name changes and make taxonomic decisions to assist such stabilisation if necessary; and include taxa from outside Australia where they are represented by native taxa within Australia. Australian native taxa include those from: Christmas, Torres Strait, Lord Howe, Norfolk, Macquarie, Heard and McDonald Islands; all the Australian Antarctic Territory; and the territorial waters of Australia. The book also aims to provide details of all pertinent homonyms, including non-mammalian homonyms and identify areas of future taxonomic research. Homonyms are Latin names which are shared by different organisms, the newer of the names being invalid. The format of the book follows contents, introduction, acknowledgements, glossary, taxonomies (the core section), references, an appendix of secondary sources explaining publication dates in particular books/journals, and two indexes with common and scientific names.

The book opens with an introduction, which explains the logic followed in making decisions about taxonomic names, rank, order and their presentation within the book. Arguments on the structure of common names, species concepts, and higher and lower taxonomic ranks are given. The volume's core, and largest, section is the taxonomic section. This section gives the currently recognised taxa with the relevant author, date, type localities (where known) and complete synonymies as

References

- Christidis, L., and Boles, W. E. 2008. 'Systematics and taxonomy of Australian birds'. (CSIRO Publishing: Melbourne).
Frith, H. J. 1982. 'Pigeons and Doves of Australia'. (Rigby: Adelaide).
Higgins, P. J., and Davies, S. J. J. F. (Eds) 1996. 'Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds. Vol. 3: Snipe to Pigeons'. (Oxford University Press: Melbourne).

follows: e.g. '*Pseudocheirus peregrinus* (Boddaert, 1785) Eastern Ring-tailed Possum... Type locality: Endeavour River, Queensland, Australia. Comments: Based on the 'Opossum' referred to by Hawkesworth (1773: 586), 'New Holland Opossum' of Pennant (1781: 310), J Cook and King (1784: 55, plate 8) and the 'White-tailed Opossum' of Shaw (1800: 504)... Future Taxonomic Research: This species is badly in need of taxonomic revision. The subspecies as presently recognised have distributions that seem to make little geographic sense...' The comments section in the synonymy also provides a broad taxonomic history based on significant reviews which includes homonyms. The next largest section is the references at 110 pages. The intended audience of this book as proposed by the publishers are: taxonomic researchers, mammalian scientists, wildlife managers, tertiary students and others interested in the science and/or history of taxonomy.

The strength and bulk of this volume lies in its research. The research involved is extreme with the detail required imposing. The two main sections, taxonomies and references, required a flawless level of accuracy and consistency in finding their primary sources and collating them in this comprehensive secondary source. It is a first stopping-point on the way to finding the primary sources and as such it is invaluable.

The text is technical but consistent, the writing concise and understandable. For those unfamiliar with words like synonymised or monophyletic the short glossary (given as: Definitions of nomenclatural and bibliographic terms) will perhaps be useful. Alas, the two words I just used as examples were not found in this glossary. This no doubt serves to highlight the technical nature of the book. It is without doubt a valuable resource for systematists and taxonomists, and students of these disciplines. I use it to: search histories involving species names, which have evolved through greater knowledge; see if the species has been lumped or split, downgraded to subspecies, or elevated to species. The volume's most important function to me is to point me to the primary source of a taxon's first publication and type description. To fully research about any taxa the synonymies provide full sets of references. The synonymies are organised consistently and are easy to follow without overuse of abbreviations. The consistent organisation of the text facilitates fast movement in finding the relevant data: a critical point in any such volume.

The supplementary material in this book is minimal; this is not a book of photographs or drawings. The focus is on getting readers to what they need. Perhaps the glossary could have had more words in it derived from the introduction. The introduction is relevant in that it functions to explain the methods used in constructing the taxonomies. Perhaps the single two-page

appendix is supplementary; yet, it gives a quick and invaluable list of papers/sections of books and journals that explain the dates, and thus the priorities. For example, Fletcher (1896), given in this appendix gives best information available for the publication dates of early issues and volumes of the *Proceedings of the Linnean Society of New South Wales*.

In evaluating this book I asked myself and the senior author Stephen Jackson why the book was needed despite the existence of similar online resources. His reply was too long to place here and I concurred with every point he made adding that I was frustrated by the erroneous and incomplete nature of the online resources. Thus, I recommend this volume to all those working with aspects of mammalian taxonomy and

to university libraries, museums and wildlife management institutions.

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References

- Fletcher, J. J. (1896). On the dates of publication of the early volumes of the Society's Proceedings. *Proceedings of the Linnean Society of New South Wales* **10**, 533–536. doi:10.5962/BHL.PART.24365
- Jackson, S. M. 2003. 'Australian mammals: biology and captive management'. (CSIRO Publishing: Melbourne).