

Book review

HOW BIRDS BEHAVE: INTERPRETING WHAT THEY DO AND WHY

By Wenfei Tong

2020. Published by CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne. 224 pp.
Hardcover, AU\$40.00, ISBN 9781486313280

Wenfei Tong is a biologist and Research Associate at the Department of Organismic and Evolutionary Biology at Harvard University. She has previously published, *Bird Love: The Family Life of Birds* (Tong 2020). Both books are interestingly published on similar subjects indicating the author's broad knowledge in this varied and challenging area. Her work interests me because my research is focused on the breeding ecology and behaviour of birds.

The aim of this book is found in its title: *Interpreting what they do and why*. It thus aims to explain the how and why of bird behaviour. The book follows an expository style, breaking bird behaviour into large ecological headings, which are the chapters of the book, and then dividing these into subsets with examples of species known to use those particular behaviours. It then discusses what we know about why they use those behaviours, which is typically associated with their evolution. For example, different species of Crossbills *Loxia* spp., have crossed beaks that vary in how much they are crossed. This variation is explained by their local diets and is unique to each area.

The book is organised into the standard format of contents, foreword, introduction, chapters, bibliography and an index. There are six chapters on: finding food, social behaviour, courtship, nesting behaviour, prey responses and dealing with climate change. The book is substantial at 224 pages and has 158 colour illustrations and photographs.

The book is clearly targeted at a general audience, but there is sufficient detail within to attract professional ornithologists (although the referencing is greatly disappointing and diminishes its usefulness to professionals). The text lacks in-text references. There are intermittent mentions of specific studies and of specific researchers in the text, and these studies may be found in the simple bibliography (but I did not check them all).

The strength of this book lies in the large amount of very interesting biology that is covered, which is enough to act as a starter for postgraduate students. But, alas, its greatest weakness is that all this wonderful starting information is wasted without the in-text references. But, surely this is the price to be paid for making it friendlier for birdwatchers and general readers.

Much of the material in the book is known to professional ornithologists, but much will be new to general readers. So does the text advance the discipline of ornithology? Perhaps it can if readers use their imagination to look up the species and behaviour given in the book and thus find the primary literature. Otherwise it is just a general read for undergraduates who may be too busy anyway. Its greatest educational value is therefore for schoolchildren and general birdwatchers whom I suspect will learn from it and not need to dig further.

The writing style is very clear and easy to understand. The organisation of arguments follows logically, which lends itself to armchair, desk, or bedtime reading. The language is by no means too thick. The research and knowledge in the book is of the highest level and always pertinent. Thus, I shake my head in disbelief that it is presented as largely unreferenced. There are 158 colour illustration and photographs, all are very high quality and pertinent, the illustrations in particular are of the highest standard: they are totally fit for purpose and are another strength of this book.

I recommend this book to anyone interested in garnering a general understanding of how birds behave – or why they are the shaped they the way they are, or why their eggs and beaks have peculiar characteristics, and why that behaviour or morphology has evolved as it has – these must include general and professional readers, and secondary schoolchildren. However, I long to see the second, and updated, edition with in-text references!

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Reference

Tong, W. (2020). 'Bird Love: The Family Life of Birds'. (Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey).