

## BOOK REVIEW

*A FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF AUSTRALIA* by Graham Pizzey, illustrated by Roy Doyle, published by Collins, 1980; pp. 460; col. and b. and w. illust.; 726 maps. A\$25.00.

The purposes of this review are to assist the reader of the Guide and to point out its specially commendable features and improvements which could be incorporated in a revised edition.

In short, the text is excellent whereas the illustrations and distribution maps are of uneven standard. Major disappointments include the English names used and the omission of illustrations of many rarer species. A number of innovative illustrations are used, mainly of birds in flight.

An acid test of the Guide is the standard of information on the large and difficult seabird and wader groups. For seabirds, the Guide is, if anything, less useful than the earlier book by Peter Slater (*A Field Guide to Australian Birds*, Vol 1, 1970), whereas it is the most informative work yet published on waders in Australasia.

In bulk and scope, this is a concise handbook rather than a field guide.

The separation of text, illustrations and distribution maps and use of rather fine print may be the most economically justifiable format, but it is not the most convenient. This approach must be carefully balanced against the practicability of the book when it is intended for field use.

Disappointing and confusing is the use of many English names which differ from those in the R.A.O.U. list of "Recommended English names for Australian birds" (Emu 77: supplement). This will surely erode any success the R.A.O.U. list has achieved in standardising English names. Although most of the book was prepared before the publication of the R.A.O.U. list, the author must have been aware of the impending move towards standardisation for he comments (p.14): "It is doubtful if the changes [the R.A.O.U. list] recommends will win popular acceptance in all cases." Sacrifices of personal preference are required if Australian ornithology is to avoid becoming bogged in controversy and quibbling over English nomenclature.

The attitude of the Guide to rarities is disappointing. For example, the current interest in seabirds and waders shown by amateurs demands the inclusion of more details about rarities of these groups in a guide to Australian birds.

More emphasis should be placed on taking detailed field notes before consulting guides.

Guides should be used as their names imply. They are never flawless; and knowledge of both distribution and field identification is continually being revised and extended.

Acknowledgement of publications consulted seems too scanty and incorporation of a bibliography would have been valuable as a starting point for further reading.

### TEXT

The text is the most comprehensive available in a field guide to Australian birds and is the strong-point of the book. It is more informative on field marks, similar species, range and status, and breeding than several comparable works.

The introductory remarks to each Family and some genera and groups are informative, covering many aspects of anatomy, ecology and taxonomy. Information of this depth has never before been included in this type of publication. The placement of information on food under a separate heading for Families is both economical and sensible, as basic food types often vary little within a Family or are poorly known.

Continued use of the section on "other names" will be of value to observers more familiar with local names or bewildered by name changes.

Under "field marks" the best field marks are italicized, giving faster access to vital information; the emphasis is generally well placed. Females, immatures and distinctive races receive more complete treatment than in previous field guides and useful notes on behaviour are included. Wing-span data for albatrosses and hawks are useful for rough comparison between species and measurement of beach-derelicts and road-killed specimens. The occasional use of jargon (e.g. "jizz", p.263) is not sound, for the meaning of such terms is not plain to all readers.

Points on similar species are fairly consistent in standard, although some over-imaginative comparisons are made (e.g. Australian Pelican and White-bellied Sea-Eagle in flight), and important similarities omitted (e.g. Square-tailed Kite and immature Spotted Harrier).

"Voice" remarks are generally of a high standard because the author describes many complex calls in detail and often uses both elaborate descriptions and phonetic characterizations. Common variations are also included. Voice and habitat notes for most seabirds commendably are omitted, being considered of little use.

The habitat descriptions are adequate for a field guide and should be readily understood

by most readers. Pleasingly, geographical variations in habitat preference are frequently mentioned.

"Breeding" notes are sound but this section should perhaps have been titled "Nest and Eggs", as no breeding dates are given. This omission may be justified in the light of the capacity of many species to breed whenever conditions become suitable.

The section on "range and status" is a highlight of the Guide. Inclusion of specific localities, of dates for vagrant and extra-limital observations, and of records at extremities of ranges, is commendable. Information on seasonal movements and status is detailed and vague generalisations are avoided. The long delay in publication has been unfortunate as information was very thoroughly researched up to early 1976.

Specific comments are warranted on a number of groups and species accounts, principally those most difficult to identify and which are relevant to South Australia.

1. Identification notes for seabirds are meagre in the light of what has been available in print for several years. No mention is made of perhaps the most obvious difference between Southern and Northern Giant-Petrels: the pale bill-tip of Southern and dark bill-tip of Northern. Pizzey seems too defeatist on the difficulties of distinguishing some groups. (e.g. *Phoebastria* albatrosses, *Procellaria* petrels).
2. "Descriptions" of Darter, cormorants and herons and allies in flight are useful.
3. Egrets: neck-length comparisons for Great and Intermediate are excellent; neck-lengths of Cattle and Little and pink upper-leg of Great in breeding season are omitted. Eastern Reef Egret, in South Australia at least, has conspicuous yellow-green, not grey, bill.
4. Separation of immature Night-Heron and Australian Bittern is good, as are field marks of Freckled Duck.
5. Raptor section good with many comparisons between species and descriptions of flight characteristics. However, the orbit of adult Australian Hobbies in South Australia at least is blue not yellow.
6. Lewin's Rail: no mention of barring on wings and body, but useful description of immature.
7. Reasonably up to date on methods of field identification of waders; more complete on extra-Australian distributions than Slater.
8. There are *no* breeding records of the Banded Stilt in South Australia other than at Lake Callabonna.
9. Eyrean Grasswren: size erroneously stated, actually very similar to other grasswrens.
10. There are no confirmed records of Noisy Miner north of Jamestown.
11. The Painted Honeyeater record from Curdimurka is in fact unsubstantiated.
12. The Grey Honeyeater is recorded from Granite Downs not 'Granville Downs' as stated.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

The Guide contains 56 colour and 32 black and white plates and five species are sketched with the text. For economy, many of the plates are in black and white; for drably-coloured groups and many flight illustrations this approach seems justifiable. However, the plates of woodswallows and trillers (plate 82) and ducks in flight (plates 11 and 12) would be more useful in colour.

Reproduction of the original paintings appears to have been so consistently poor that one can only regret that some of the paintings have been published at all. Illustrations of the *Neophema* parrots (plate 52) and quail-thrushes and babbler (plate 61) exemplify the unrealistic and confusing bright greens, blues and chestnut that are prominent in many plates. Presumably also due to poor reproduction, several illustrations display inaccurate and misleading washes of yellow. Important examples are the upperparts and frons of the Black-eared Miner and the belly of the race *rufiventris* of the Grey Shrike-thrush. Furthermore, several species would be impossible to identify from the plates: the Little Shrike-thrush does not have a grey-green back; the Spotted Quail-thrush does not have a sky-blue breast; the Spinifexbird should have its long upper-tail coverts emphasised and the Atherton Scrubwren is, apart from its caption, indeterminate. It is felt that these and many other inaccuracies of this nature are simply inexcusable in a book purporting to show "clearly and accurately the form and plumage of each species" of Australian bird.

At least 50 of the species listed in the text are not illustrated. About one third of these had been recorded only once in Australia at the time of the Guide's writing, most of the remainder several times. Distributional knowledge of seabirds in particular is advancing rapidly, necessitating illustrations of rarities from this group. For example, the Royal Albatross and Grey-backed Storm-Petrel deserve inclusion. Other notable omissions include the Ringed Plover, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Redshank, Asian Dowitcher, all three phalaropes, the Long-tailed Jaeger and some wagtails.

Frustratingly, the order of plates differs from the text in several places. Notable examples include ibises and spoonbills occurring between plovers and pigeons, and cuckoo-shrikes following the pardalotes. Spacing is generally economical, but the plates of falcons (25) and waders (37, 38 and 41) in flight and the kingfishers (58) are too cluttered. It is also

disappointing to see 24 honeyeaters reduced in size to fit on one plate, while five boldly marked (and comparatively easy to identify) chat species and one wagtail occupy a whole plate.

Pointers on illustrations to indicate important field marks are a welcome introduction to an Australian guide but reference to the text must be made in many instances to determine whether colour, pattern or shape is being emphasised.

The use of bird names together with species numbers on the plates facilitates quick reference and so gives an advantage over earlier guides. Nevertheless, the labelling is sometimes inadequate or absent, and this may lead to confusion over some of the falcons, button-quails, frogmouths and shrike-thrushes (plates 25, 30, 56 and 60). Distinctive immatures of the Brown Goshawk and Square-tailed Kite (plate 19) and Fairy or Little Tern (plate 28) are inadequately labelled.

A scale marker is positioned at the base of each plate and although generally adhered to, inconsistencies occur. Two important ones are an over-large figure of the Southern Fulmar and an undersized figure of the Sanderling. It is unfortunate that scales are not similar within related groups, particularly on facing plates (e.g. 76 and 77); this must result in some confusion over unfamiliar species.

These faults are partially compensated for by the introduction of valuable flight portrayals of the grebes, cormorants, Pacific Heron, ibises and spoonbills, Australian Bustard, Brolga, thick-knees, Painted Snipe, Rainbow Bee-eater and cuckoo-shrikes. Useful illustrations of the harriers, Brown Goshawk, Sea-Eagle, stilts and some terns from above, and underwings of some of the waders and spread tails of the bronze-cuckoos are also introduced. Also commendable are the colour illustrations of immature Hooded and Black-fronted Plovers and Red-kneed Dotterel.

Inclusion of many waders in breeding plumage and eclipse phases of some male ducks, wrens and trillers is a major advance. Illustration of these plumages is essential for distinguishing species in these groups at certain times of the year and has been long overdue in Australian guides. It is therefore extremely disappointing to see the bird depicted as a Red-necked Stint in nuptial plumage displaying the *diagnostic* chest streaking of the Little Stint, a species whose occurrence in Australia we are only beginning to understand.

A number of important illustrations of Slater's guides are not emulated, principally bills of seabirds, the complete breeding colours of

egrets, the immature Pacific Baza, wing-carriage angles of raptors, underwings of medium-sized terns and the Long-toed Stint in flight. Several illustrations still untried might be considered for future guides: egrets with out-stretched necks, bitterns in flight; spread tails in harriers; the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper in breeding plumage; female Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos from throughout the species' range.

Bird shapes must be particularly difficult to portray faithfully and the illustrations of egrets and herons, large gulls, oystercatchers and rosellas (tails) are unsatisfactory in this regard. Furthermore, the bills of the Caspian Tern, Curlew Sandpiper and Mongolian and Large Sand Plovers are poorly proportioned. Wings are too short on the albatrosses, Square-tailed Kite and Black Falcon and too large on the Freckled Duck.

Further specific comments on details of plumage and soft parts in the illustrations are now presented:

1. Bill should be yellowish on the female Painted Snipe and may be all black in the non-breeding Common Tern. Legs of Sand Plovers are not sky-blue.
2. Markings absent or insufficient: white belly of Pectoral Sandpiper; streaks on throat and chest of the Thick-billed Grasswren — the birds depicted could be confused with the Eyrean Grasswren; blue below eye of the Pied Honeyeater and the orange abdominal patches of the Blue-winged, Elegant and Rock Parrots which, admittedly, may be faint or absent.
3. Markings excessive: dark upperparts of Australian Bittern; facial blue of the Little Friarbird and black behind the eye of the White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike which is improperly stressed with a pointer.
4. Underwings of Shy and Yellow-nosed Albatrosses are inaccurate, and are almost indistinguishable for Hutton's and Fluttering Shearwaters.
5. Back patterns of Pectoral and Sharp-tailed Sandpipers should be reversed.
6. Wingbars on female red-breasted *Petroica* robins are not very useful.
7. Male and female Red-lore Whistlers should be more distinctly marked with rufous; the bird drawn as a female actually resembles a sub-adult, but could easily be mistaken for the cinnamon-bellied female of the race *fuliginosa* of the Golden Whistler. Throats of uncoloured Red-lore Whistlers should be unmarked, finely scalloped in uncoloured Golden and finely streaked in uncoloured Gilbert's Whistlers.

The most outstanding plates in terms of style and accuracy include those of the Australian Bustard and cranes (44), wrens (68 and 69) and finches (85). Outstanding figures include the adult Spotted Harrier and Broad-billed Sandpiper at rest, male Rufous Whistler, races

*melanotus* and *callainus* of the Splendid Wren and the White-browed Treecreeper.

Although the comparison may be unfair, it is as well to note that no Australian field guide has approached some European and North American guides in the quality of its illustrations.

#### DISTRIBUTION MAPS

The distribution maps are confusing, as the claim (p. 411) that they show breeding distributions has clearly not been rigidly adhered to. Apart from the maps of the Letter-winged Kite, Superb Fruit-Dove and Flock Bronzewing, all other maps appear to show the total distribution of each species. The inclusion of maps for non-breeding migrants (e.g. waders) confirms the error in the excessively brief introduction to the maps. The use of two-tone maps showing both breeding and non-breeding distributions, would be desirable in an Australian field guide.

Printing of the maps has been good in view of their small size which has not prevented reasonably fine detail being included. Dots are used to indicate isolated populations (on mainland and on islands), and distinct distributions of races are frequently indicated: both excellent features.

Specific comments are necessary regarding the accuracy of species' distribution within South Australia, assuming that maps attempt to show *total* distributions.

The maps for the Square-tailed Kite and Torresian Crow are the best published attempts at depicting the range of these birds within the State. Fieldwork in the far north and north-east of South Australia since the time of preparing the book has extended the known range of many waterbirds (e.g. Freckled Duck) and passerines (e.g. Rufous-crowned Emu-

wren). Some of the errors in Pizzey's maps could be due to the dearth of published records from western and northern parts of the State.

Allowing for the date of preparation, the more important South Australian distribution errors are as follows:

1. Species omitted: Plumed Whistling-Duck, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Oriental Pratincole and Dollarbird.
2. Incorrectly shown in the far-west and north-west: Great Egret, Nankeen Night-Heron, Yellow-billed Spoonbill, Swamp Harrier, Whiskered Tern, Sacred Kingfisher and Rufous-crowned Emu-wren.
3. Incorrectly shown in the far north-east: Painted Snipe, White-throated Needletail, Painted Firetail and Pied Butcherbird.
4. Too extensive toward the north: Cattle Egret, Australian Bittern, Malleefowl, Marsh Sandpiper, Latham's Snipe, Bartailed Godwit and Noisy Miner.
5. Too extensive toward the south: Variegated Wren, Chestnut-breasted Whiteface, Gibber Chat, Pied Butcherbird and Little Woodswallow.
6. Should be given dot distributions: Intermediate Egret, Little Bittern, King Quail, Ruff, Little Lorikeet, Azure Kingfisher, Regent Honeyeater and Fuscous Honeyeater.

To conclude it may be said that the virtues and faults of this and other recent field guides to Australian birds are to some extent complementary. The current work, although deserving much praise for its far more useful text, is severely marred by the poor standard of many of its illustrations; so much so that they are more of a setback than an advance on earlier works despite some useful innovations. One hopes that later editions will see vastly improved reproductions.

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