

BOOK REVIEWS

SPECIES-CHECKLIST OF THE BIRDS OF NEW GUINEA by B.M. Beehler and B.W. Finch, Australasian Ornithological Monographs, no. 1, published by Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, 1985. Pp 127. Price \$10. Order from RAOU, 21 Gladstone Street, Moonee Ponds, Vic. 3039.

THE BIRDS OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA, including the Bismarck Archipelago and Bougainville, Vol. 1, by B.J. Coates, Dove Publications; Aderley, Queensland 1985. Plates, figures, pp 464. Price \$75, includes postage if ordered from author; order from Dove Publications, 3 Grenoble Street, the Gap, Qld. 4061.

BIRDS OF NEW GUINEA, by B.M. Beehler, T.K. Pratt and D.A. Zimmerman, illustrated by D.A. Zimmerman and J. Coe. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1986. Plates 55, figures, pp 294. Price \$60.

The decision by the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union to hold its 88th Annual Congress in Papua New Guinea serves to highlight the growing interest by ornithologists and birdwatchers in our northern neighbour. Whereas much of the ornithological visitation to New Guinea in previous years has only been possible by institutionally-funded scientists, there is now a major shift towards the non-professional visitor. Until very recently — the last two years — the available literature has not kept in step with this expanding appeal. Few books had been published on the birds of this region, and the majority were long out of print or of limited utility.

Ernst Mayr's 1941 *List of New Guinea Birds* has been unavailable for many years except to the lucky patronizer of the second hand book trade. The only other list of the whole of New Guinea has been that in the appendix of William Peckover & L.W. Filewood's *Birds of New Guinea and Tropical Australia* (1976), now also out of print. A new and much more easily accessible work has appeared to fill this void, *Species-Checklist of the Birds of New Guinea*, by Bruce Beehler & Brian Finch, two ornithologists with considerable field experience, one professional and one amateur. It is the first of the RAOU's Monograph Series.

Despite being the logical successor to Mayr's work, the two are not, however, strictly equivalent. The Beehler & Finch list provides for each species the scientific name, English name, original citation, alternative names, and for some species, a short annotation on the taxonomic status. The taxonomic treatment followed for each family is cited at the start of the respective section. Synonymies of scientific names and species distributions, which are included in Mayr, are omitted in the new volume. The result is that the Beehler & Finch monograph is a succinct list. As most people will not need the additional information of Mayr's book they should find it a very handy and easily obtainable list of New Guinea birds, adequate for many purposes and more so, given the scarcity of its predecessor. It can be obtained from the RAOU at quite a reasonable price.

For many years, the classic of Papuan ornithology has been A.L. Rand & E.T. Gilliard's *Handbook of the Birds of New Guinea*. Its only competitor was the idiosyncratic and highly impractical *Birds of New Guinea* by Thomas Iredale. Rand & Gilliard's volume itself had many drawbacks, the most prominent being the very limited information additional to the species' and subspecies' descriptions and the accounts of their distribution. Its few plates are black and white drawings representing at best one species per family.

With the publication of the first volume of Brian Coates' *The Birds of Papua New Guinea*, we now have the closest thing to a real handbook for the region, all other contenders being forced to take a backseat. Like Rand & Gilliard, it contains information on species — descriptions, distribution and subspecies but expands the species - accounts with a substantially greater range of biological information (including details of habit, behaviour, voice and breeding), augmented by range maps. The most striking difference is in the many excellent colour photographs that adorn this book. In addition to those that illustrate the introductory sections on habitats and environment of Papua New Guinea, there are colour photographs of over 230 species, more than half of those treated in the text of the book. A number of these depict specific behaviour patterns or are of birds in flight; line drawings further supplement

these pictures. In all, 377 species are treated, *i.e.*, all the non-passerines, with maps given for all but the more irregular vagrants. The second volume will conclude with the passerines.

The biggest drawback of Coates' book is that, unlike Rand & Gilliard, it does not cover the entire New Guinean landmass. On the other hand, the Bismarck Archipelago and Bougainville do fall within its confines. Appendices summarizing the birds of Irian Jaya and the Solomon Islands are promised for volume two and should help rectify this shortcoming, my only substantial criticism of an otherwise excellent piece of work. It is even more remarkable that in addition to writing the text, Coates took most of the photographs, designed the book and published it himself — an ambitious venture well-accomplished. Congratulations are due to Brian Coates and I eagerly await the next volume.

None of the books mentioned thus far has been suitable as even a rudimentary *field guide*. The only books to make any attempt at this have been *Upland Birds of Northeastern New Guinea* by Bruce Beehler and *Birds of the North Solomons* by Don Hadden, both Wau Ecology Institute Handbooks. Despite the field guide format, both are severely restricted in their geographic coverage, omitting much of Papua New Guinea and all of Irian Jaya and the Bismarck Archipelago. Even for the area under consideration, the illustrations (paintings in Beehler, photographs in Hadden) are not entirely satisfactory.

It was then with considerable anticipation that the first comprehensive field guide to all of New Guinea and its satellite islands was awaited. Finally in 1985, birdwatchers and ornithologists were rewarded with the appearance of *Birds of New Guinea* by Bruce Beehler, Thane Pratt & Dale Zimmerman, with further text contributions by Brian Finch, Jared Diamond and Harry Bell. The illustrations were executed by Zimmerman and James Coe. It is inevitable that some errors and problems will be encountered in a pioneering work of this nature, but in the overall context of this impressive work they detract little and only a few will be mentioned in passing.

The format of the book is fairly standard for field guides with the plates grouped together in the centre of the book (attempts to follow the 'modern' arrangements of placing a species' text and illustration on facing pages would have been prohibitive). No maps are included but given the still sketchy knowledge of bird distribution in

New Guinea such efforts would have been perhaps more subjective than realistic. The text covers some 700 species, presenting in each account a description, similar species, habits, voice, and a brief outline of the range. These accounts are succinct and the section on habits should help observers with little or no experience in New Guinea. More general background on each group is provided in introductions to the families.

Preceding the accounts, which form the body of the text, is a helpful introductory section. These preliminary pages give an overview of the ornithological history, environment (climate, vegetation, geology, etc), ornithogeography, bird regions, ecology and conservation of birds in this country. A smaller section entitled "In the Field" presents numerous practical guides to birding in New Guinea. A gazetteer and bibliography follow the species-accounts.

Of the approximately 700 species in the text, more than 600 are illustrated. There are 47 colour plates and eight black and white ones, all of high quality; these will prove invaluable for identifying the birdlife, their minor faults being the occasionally oddly proportioned bird and a few plates in which the printing seems to have lost the definition and clarity otherwise evident.

The book seems sturdily constructed as it will need to be if it is to be of practical use in the field. I can report that one friend has already used it in the field and found it satisfactory in this respect. Moisture will always be a problem in New Guinea but the soft cover appears sufficiently water resistant to withstand this, as should the high quality paper of the plates; the paper of text pages will more readily succumb. Given the price of the book, one should demand that it stand up to a reasonable degree of use.

The single biggest disappointment is the price. In Australia, the soft cover is around \$60 and the hard cover edition well over \$100. Not only will this discourage potential, Australian-based visitors, but it surely will be totally prohibitive for what should be a major user group, the indigenous people of New Guinea.

This aside, *Birds of New Guinea* is a landmark among books devoted to this region. Both it and Coates' book are excellent additions to the literature on Australasian birds and should be placed high on the list of priorities of anyone interested in this avifauna. It is to be hoped the prices will not be so restrictive as to deny them the audience they rightly deserve.

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