

THE SLATER FIELD GUIDE TO AUSTRALIAN BIRDS by P., P. and R. Slater. Published by Rigby, Dee Why West, 1986; 344 pp., 157 colour plates + 12 pp. bl. & wh. illustrations; distribution maps. 215-113-22 mm. Paperback, sewn binding. Rec. price \$29.95.

This Guide is a completely revised and up-to-date version of perhaps the best known of recent Australian field guides, first published in two volumes in 1972 and 1974. It combines the easy to use layout of Simpson & Day's *Birds of Australia* and the portability of Pizzey's *A Field Guide to the Birds of Australia*, while maintaining the high quality illustrations of the original volumes. To quote the authors (p. 6), it "seeks to provide sufficient information in the most compact and portable form possible for the 756 birds so far recorded in Australia and Tasmania and at sea over the continental shelf."

In general, the requirements of a field guide are well met, although the labelling of plates, fine print and use of some English names other than those recommended by the R.A.O.U. detract from its value.

A brief Introduction describes how to use the book and defines terms. A list of texts for further reading is also provided. The species are arranged in more or less the same standard taxonomic order of other recent field guides and reference books of Australian birds. Opposite each colour plate of similar species appears a page of text, headed by a summary of characteristics within the group. Basic information on each species follows, and includes notes on immature and distinctive forms, behavioural traits, voice, nest and eggs, range and status. In some instances, similar species are referred to and identifying features spelled out. Detailed notes are provided for corvids and the Common-Arctic Tern complex.

The Guide covers all species either recorded or tentatively reported in Australia and adjacent seas until mid-1986, and all but a few are illustrated in colour. Unfortunately, the Blackbird has been completely omitted, an error which may lead to mistaken reports of the less common White's and Song Thrushes.

Taxonomy incorporates some recent revisions (e.g. the splitting of the Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo complex) but discounts others (e.g. that of the wedgebills and fieldwrens). The Spotted and Yellow-rumped Pardalotes, Brown and Inland Thornbills, Twenty-eight, Port Lincoln, Mallee and Cloncurry Ringnecks and Yellow-throated and Black-eared Miners, although all illustrated, have each been combined under single species. Disappointingly, many common names do not follow those recommended in the R.A.O.U.'s list of *Recommended English names for Australian Birds* (Emu 77: supplement). Differences are claimed to be in line with other Field Guides or to follow personal preferences. (Unfortunately on p. 10 it is implied that the now extinct dwarf emus of King and Kangaroo islands were the same species, whereas recent research has demonstrated the distinctiveness of the Kangaroo Island birds. — Ed).

PLATES

As with Slater's original Guide, the revised colour plates are of high standard in layout, colour and accuracy. Highlights of the book are the juvenile and immature plumages and distinctive races not previously illustrated, such as we see in the plates of chats, plumed honeyeaters, scrubwrens, shrike-thrushes, whistlers and bronze-cuckoos. Other useful illustrations are the Mallard-Black Duck hybrid and the under-flipper patterns of penguins.

However, many errors, omissions and ambiguities have occurred in the labelling of plates, and the use of "race" and "form" is confusing. For example, in the plate of curlews and whimbrels on p. 123, confusing labelling is exacerbated by the "European form" of the Whimbrel not being mentioned in the text, and the labelling on p. 173 of the rosellas is a little cumbersome in relation to the text on p. 172. These may have been avoided by the more liberal use of the innovative background circles of a different shade to enclose races or plumage phases of species, as in the plate of woodswallows on page 314.

The six double pages of black and white illustrations of birds in flight are poorly reproduced and will be of limited value. Some of the labels of seabirds on pp. 36-37 are misplaced (Herald, Grey, Kermadec, Soft-plumaged, White-headed and Tahiti petrels).

Some of the most valuable of Peter Slater's original illustrations have been omitted from this volume, such as those of woodswallows and terns in flight, bill profiles of corvids and seabirds and wing-carriage angles of raptors.

The following are some further comments on the plates:

1. The captions of the adult and juvenile Sooty Albatross have been reversed.
2. The Kerguelen Petrel is too pale.
3. Black should extend more markedly beyond the eye in the Black-shouldered Kite. When the birds are perched, this feature separates it from the Letter-winged Kite.
4. The captions of the adult and juvenile Marsh Harrier on p. 85 have been reversed.
5. The undertail of the Spotless Crake is excessively barred.
6. In breeding plumage the breast and flank markings of the Great Knot and the tattlers should be more extensive than shown.
7. The legs of the Long-toed stint are too short.
8. The full nuptial plumage of Cox's Sandpiper is still unrecorded.
9. The rump and tail colours of Wilson's Phalarope have been reversed.
10. The upperparts of the Rock Parrot should be duller.
11. The race *callainus* of the Splendid Fairy-wren *Malurus splendens* should have a paler crown.

12. The quail-thrushes are too bright, but this is perhaps a fault in the reproduction of the plates.
13. The Mangrove Warbler should have white tail margins, as mentioned in the text.
14. The race *rosinae* of the Slender-billed Thornbill *Acanthiza iredalei* as illustrated more resembles the un-illustrated race *hedleyi*. *A. i. rosinae* has a pale grey-brown breast and flanks and the upperparts are browner.
15. The Black-eared Miner should be much darker, the illustrated bird is quite possibly based on a specimen intermediate between Yellow-throated and Blacked-eared Miners (see *S. Aust. Orn.* 30: 5-13).

Although the Guide has impressively up-to-date coverage, some of those species vagrant to Australia have inadequate identifying notes and illustrations. For instance, the Stilt Sandpiper has longer legs than shown. The tail of the Red-rumped Swallow should be shorter.

For the first time in any Australian field guide, the bottom of each plate illustrates an egg of every species that breeds in Australia, together with the eggs' average dimensions. These may assist in identification of any nest or egg encountered in the field.

DISTRIBUTION MAPS

A small scale distribution map is provided for most species, unless their range can be easily described in the text. These are not detailed but act as an aid to identification. Based on the R.A.O.U. *Atlas*, they are generally accurate, although the population of the Western Gerygone on southern Eyre Peninsula has been omitted, the presence of Elegant Parrots on southern Eyre Peninsula remains unconfirmed and the distribution of the Yellow-rumped Pardalote (treated as a race of the Spotted) has been omitted. Maps for all of the firetail finches have been omitted. The maps are of insufficient detail to include Kangaroo Island.

To conclude, this is the most portable and easy to use field guide to species and distinct subspecies of Australian birds, combining the best features of recent similar works. Improved labelling of plates, especially of the different subspecies, will enhance future editions.

**GRAHAM CARPENTER, with contributions
by R. F. BROWN and J. B. COX.**

Editor's Note: I for one would like to register a tinge of disapproval at the inclusion on the front cover of an introduced bird, the only known colony of which has not been recorded in

Australia for many years and which was considered extinct in 1976 (see Blakers, M., Davies, S. and Reilly, P., 1984, *Atlas of Australian Birds* for details). I presume that the publishers are to blame for this. The bird is, of course, the Red Bishop or Grenadier Weaver *Euplectes orix*.