

BOOK REVIEWS

THE FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF AUSTRALIA by Graham Pizzey, illustrated by Frank Knight. Harper Collins, Sydney, 1997. 576 pp., \$35rrp.

On first examining Pizzey and Knight I thought, great, a strong light-weight weather-proof cover, but rather bulky for a field guide. And while the bird descriptions were similar to Pizzey and Doyle (Pizzey 1985), the pictorial plates were new and now opposite text.

When learning to birdwatch, I liked Pizzey (1985) for its relatively thorough descriptions, and groupings of similar-looking birds in the plates, often with identifying features highlighted by black cheat lines. Later, Slater (1990) was more portable and, uniquely, illustrated the egg of most species. While Simpson (1993) profiled sea-bird bills (handy for beach-washed specimens), illustrated birds in natural poses and provided sketches of interesting behaviours such as a diving sequence. A large section on the life of birds, habitats and bird families appeared at the end of the book. Why a new guide?

Graham Pizzey more than accounted for my thoughts when eloquently addressing an SAOA meeting recently. He not only wished to improve upon Pizzey (1985), but sought to provide more Australians than ever before with an attractive and user-friendly introduction to birds, bird-watching and eventually the broader aspects of ecology. Part of the strategy involved the apparently more popular placement of species' map and text opposite accurate but vibrant drawing.

The guide is large and weighty because it is so informative. An extensive introduction, accompanied by inviting illustrations, outlines essential external features of a bird, and explains bird identification by field marks, habitat and behaviour. A discussion of birdwatching techniques, equipment and the ethical use of taped calls follows. The introduction concludes with an outline of bird migration and distribution.

The concluding 60 pages include an explanation of the classification and nomenclature of Australian birds, a glossary, bibliography, contact details for birdwatching organisations and a gazetteer and map. Notes on bird families outline the characteristic birds, diet, global range, and number of Australian and overseas species for each family.

In the body of the book, Graham has revised, without diminishing, the comprehensive descriptive text of Pizzey (1985), and now follows the taxonomy and nomenclature of Christidis and Boles (1994). Timing places it as the only major Australian field guide with this widely-accepted taxonomy. Thus, for example, quail, swans, geese, ducks, crakes, and rails are more towards the front, while swallows, martins, reed-warblers, white-eyes, thrushes, starlings and mynas the back—reflecting the latest thought on evolutionary relationships. Some former species have been lumped, e.g. the Nullarbor Quail-thrush now appears as race *alisteri* of the Cinnamon Quail-thrush *Cinclosoma cinnamomeum*. Others split, such that the Tasmanian Scrubwren *Sercornis humilis* is now separate from the White-browed Scrubwren *S. frontalis*. A departure from the Australian Ringneck *Barnardius zonarius* of Christidis and Boles (1994) is Pizzey's split into the 'Eastern Ringneck' *B. barnardi*—which is the Mallee form plus the 'Cloncurry Ringneck', race *macgillivrayi*—and the 'Western Ringneck' *B. zonarius*—which is the Port Lincoln form plus the 'Twenty-eight Parrot' race *semitorquatus* and the race *accidentalis*. Pizzey also sequences differently the ducks and geese (i.e. within the Order Anseriformes).

To some these changes and discrepancies pose a challenge; others an annoyance. Regardless, Pizzey facilitates the identification of many birds to subspecies or race. This is to be encouraged since conservation management of races and subspecies occurs and identification at that level, where possible, assists the continuity of your personal records through inevitable changes in taxonomy. On the matter of conservation, the guide provides the best indication of range and status of taxa, often, but not always, including the term 'endangered'. Many taxa are in serious decline, some only existing through the efforts of recovery teams and key stakeholders. Any attempt to better convey these concepts is to be encouraged and developed.

Each species has a section on the sexes, life stages, races, similar species, voice, habitat, breeding, nest, eggs and range and status. Key identifying features are italicised.

Notable is Frank Knight's artwork—2638 individual portraits creatively presented in 250 colour plates. Four years of preparation.

Birds are shown perched, in flight or performing typical behavioural displays, frequently backed by subtle representations of characteristic habitats. Knight often provides the various life stages, breeding phases, races and morphs for a species. Here, for example, is the only Australian field guide to picture the female Painted Honey-eater *Grantiella picta* (although the arrangement of the text obscures the differences and similarities of males, females and immatures).

I liked Knight's depiction of snipe's tails *Gallinago* spp. on p. 165 which would help banders, and of familiar behaviours such as the splashing, cocked-tail courtship display of the male Musk Duck *Biziura lobata*, and the feeding-nesting-flying-wing-flicking sittelas.

The raptor section is quite good, showing sexes, morphs, life stages, examples of flight behaviours and front-on silhouettes which indicate flat or v-shaped wings. Pages 143 and 145 show the underside of many raptors in flight and would greatly assist identification in the field, or from the car as you BOP Watch. Similar pages for waders and terns in flight are something to hope for. Some numbers on p. 143 could have been closer to the raptors they represent.

I thought the labelling or presentation of a few other birds could have been better. For example, the Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*, Pacific Black Duck *A. superciliosa* and hybrid on p. 37 take time to distinguish. On p. 209, an important feature, the breast of the male Greater Sand Plover *Charadrius leschenaultii* in breeding plumage, is obscured by the non-breeding bird.

Knight and Pizzey link text, picture and the reader's identification needs. Thus on pp. 358-9 five similar-looking gerygones are pictured and described. Elsewhere a single species, e.g. the Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans* pictured on p. 79 with its many plumage variations, covers a page. The trade-off is that the text for

this albatross accounts for half a page (the rest being blank), whereas the text for five similar-looking thornbills on p. 362 is trimmed to fit the page. Lost text in these circumstances includes 'Other names'. When present, this section provides names such as Pickwick, Wittachew and Wongbird, which sometimes assist the reading of old or colloquial literature.

There are no arrows for the key identifying features of birds (except for the Regent Parrot *Polytelis anthopeplus* in flight on p. 275), perhaps because these cheat lines encourage bad identification habits and detract from the artistic presentation. Neither are scales included, so users must refer to the text for the size of birds.

Although some errors have passed by the editors and some distribution maps have extra, incorrect parts of Australia shaded (e.g. see Flock Bronzewing *Phaps histrionica* p. 252), I think the project to produce a popular, informative, mostly accurate and up-to-date field guide has been a great success.

At a value-for-money \$35, the book is an excellent option for first-time birdwatchers or field workers and is recommended for the personal bird library. While its weight might concern bush campers and hikers, many buyers may be more sedentary. And the weatherproof cover would deflect mud and water as equally as coffee and mudcake.

REFERENCES

- Christidis, L. and Boles, W.E. 1994. *The taxonomy and species of birds of Australia and its territories*. RAOU Monograph 2, RAOU, Melbourne.
- Pizzey, G. 1985. *A field guide to the birds of Australia*. Collins, Sydney.
- Simpson, K. (ed.) 1993. *Field guide to the birds of Australia*. Fourth edition, Viking Penguin, Melbourne.
- Slater, P. 1990. *The Slater field guide to Australian birds*. Revised edition, Weldon, Sydney.

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WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT MANUAL: THE GAWLER RANGES AND KINGOONYA SOIL CONSERVATION DISTRICTS. A Resource Handbook. By Harald Ehmann and Rodger Tynan. Pastoral Management Program, Dept of Environment and Natural Resources, South Australia, 1997. 174 pp., black & white plates, figures and illustrations, colour wall

poster. Retail \$25 + \$5 p&h; \$4 for wall poster only. Contact Dept for Environment, Heritage and Aboriginal Affairs, ph (08) 8204 8888.

The reserve system in South Australia embraces about 20% of the state (mostly in the arid zone). However these reserves are not representative of the range of species and do not

include sufficient habitats needed by many animals to ensure their long-term survival. Conservation of much of South Australia's wildlife will only occur if an effective strategy is put in place for the non-reserve areas in the state and through the support of private land holders. The handbook supports this aim.

It provides user-friendly information to land holders, land managers, soil conservation boards and responsible administrative agencies that will help to maintain vertebrate diversity in the Kingoonya and Gawler Ranges Soil Conservation Districts—two of the state's nine soil districts. The handbook allows users to identify species of particular interest in the region and their habitat types, and provides other information about species' behaviour and biology. It also provides information on best-practice management for the maintenance or enhancement of wildlife diversity, contact information for accessing advice and sources of on-going wildlife management funding.

The handbook has four parts. The first, which is the largest, is essentially a list of vertebrate fauna for the region in their major taxonomic groups (i.e. native and introduced mammals, birds, reptiles, frogs and fish). The lists contain general information about species distribution, basic biology and status.

Species profiles are provided for those of conservation significance and each contains a general statement of the animal's conservation values, threats and management recommendations. The birds which are highlighted in this way are the Malleefowl *Leipoa ocellata*, Gawler Ranges Thick-billed Grasswren *Amytornis textilis myall*, Western Slender-billed Thornbill *Acanthiza iredalei iredalei*, Major Mitchell's Cockatoo *Cacatua leadbeateri*, and Night Parrot *Geopsittacus* (now *Pezoporus*) *occidentalis*.

The second part of the handbook looks at nature study and ways of helping with research. This section aims to engage those people on the land who are interested in wildlife to support efforts to increase our understanding of species in their region. It outlines practical techniques for studying the five taxonomic groups. For birds the report suggests that land holders engage in bird watching, improve their ability to distinguish between calls, become involved in organised search efforts such as Birds of Prey Watch and to keep a lookout for dead specimens which might indicate information about local

threats or could be forwarded to the South Australian Museum. As an individual who engages in a significant amount of road travel I also found the section on roadside kills in this chapter of great interest.

The third section is dedicated to exploring issues and problems associated with wildlife management. It outlines significant threats to wildlife in the region which include: a gamut of introduced species such as foxes, goats and rabbits; kangaroos; heavy grazing pressure; poaching and illegal hunting; and changes to fire management. Interestingly this section also describes a series of habitats and land units of high importance to wildlife found in the Kingoonya and Gawler Ranges which land holders can identify and manage on their properties.

The fourth and final part provides land holders with further information including wildlife and management contacts, further reading and references, details of wildlife management funding opportunities, and outlines of programs such as the federal Natural Heritage Trust and state-based Wildlife Conservation Fund.

The handbook is accompanied by a poster which contains photographs of key habitats and significant and introduced species in the two districts. It is a colourful display, set on a landscape background.

The handbook's photographs, largely provided by Harald Ehmann, Lynn Pedler and a number of staff from the South Australian Museum and state environment department, are of excellent quality. However I would have liked a little more detail and clarity in the manual's illustrations and coloured maps which, if you are unfamiliar with the area, are hard to read. I also felt that a number of management options such as fencing of remnants outside state Heritage Agreement arrangements, covenants and alternative grazing techniques might have been explored more fully, but the issue of artificial watering points was a worthwhile inclusion. The contact list might also have included more community-based operations which are now providing a range of services and advice to land holders throughout the state.

Overall I feel the handbook is a very useful contribution and I sincerely hope that it can be replicated in other soil regions where non-reserve conservation will need to play such significant part in the long-term conservation of our South Australian wildlife.

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