

REVIEW

D. L. Serventy & H. M. Whittell.—A Handbook of the Birds of Western Australia (with the exception of the Kimberley Division). 356 pp., 2 col. plates, 32 text figs. 1948.

This is one of the most valuable works on Australian ornithology which has appeared for many years—valuable not only for the information it contains, but also for its marked individuality and the new high standard it sets for would-be authors of similar enterprises in other States. Indeed, the book has exceeded expectations, although it will be remembered that both of the authors belong to the “progressive school” of ornithology in Australia to-day, and one is a professional biologist.

The book has few shortcomings; rather any criticisms can only be directed at certain aspects which may have been curtailed owing to cost or the need to keep the volume to a reasonable size. Perhaps the most serious omissions are illustrations of the majority of the species dealt with, because this removes the book from the class which would appeal to the absolute beginner. Then again, certain minor inaccuracies in descriptions of the birds may be a reflection on the quality of the material available to the authors in the State collection. For example, the Black-faced Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax fuscescens*) is stated as having “the back of the neck profusely adorned with small, narrow white feathers, *present both in the breeding and non-breeding seasons*” (italics mine—H.T.C.); actually this adornment is only present in breeding birds. In the Freckled Duck, no mention is made of obvious sexual differences; the larger male develops a pair of reddish swellings at the base of the bill in the breeding season. The sexual differences for the Kestrel (*Falco cenchroides*) are only vaguely given; the facts are the male has a pure grey tail with broad black subterminal band, while the female has a “cinnamon brown,” i.e. nankeen, tail, regularly barred with narrow black lines and a broad subterminal band—young males resemble the female, but soon show some grey in the tail. In both sexes the tail is whitish on the under-surfaces, but the black barrings are visible.

The book is divided into several sections.

The first deals with the history of ornithology in Western Australia and, while not an essential constituent in a work of this kind, provides a handy summary of the main facts and makes interesting reading.

Section II—Bird Geography—is something new to Australian ornithological literature, and should repay careful study by the serious student. A modified map of Baldwin Spencer's Australian Faunas is given, but the authors perhaps have missed a chance to indicate the South Australian outlier of the Bassian subregion (Kangaroo Island, Mt. Lofty and lower Flinders Ranges).

Section III treats the birds systematically. Out of a total of some 440 indigenous and introduced species for Western Australia, 355 are dealt with. The short summaries of the main features of each species are hardly word pictures to aid the reader in visualising the appearance of each bird, as is claimed, but should be of immense value to the more advanced beginner.

Details of distribution are adequate (there is a fine locality map inside the back cover), and the mere tabulation of facts is relieved by notes on behaviour, status, and often feeding and diet. An unusual feature in a book of this size is the attention paid to nesting details and colours and size of eggs for each species. Aboriginal bird names are also given.

—H.T.C.

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