

BOOK REVIEWS

BIRDS OF AUSTRALIA. A Summary of Information, by J. D. Macdonald; illustrated by Peter Slater, published by A. H. and A. W. Reed, Sydney, 1973; 552 pp., 24 coloured plates, numerous black and white text illustrations, 300 distribution maps. Price \$18.50.

This book is one of the very few to deal with all the birds of Australia in one volume. 725 species (including 20 introductions) are recognised, 467 being illustrated in colour, black and white, or both. There is a short introduction, a chapter on "Notes on the Text" and another on "Origin and Structure of Australian Bird Families" by D. L. Serventy; the remainder, apart from 50 pages of distribution maps and an index, consisting of a systematic account of the birds of Australia.

There are short notes on each family, with a map of world distribution if not world-wide, notes on each genus, and keys to the species. The species are dealt with under Distribution, Recognition, Description, Habitat, Habits, Breeding, Voice, Food, Status and Taxonomy. There is rarely more than half a page of information about any one species, a

number of species receiving only a half-dozen or so lines of text.

The use of keys to species is to my knowledge unique to recent Australian bird books and has much to commend it; however, these keys should be used as a guide only, for they rarely include all plumage phases (this and other limitations being stressed by the author on p. 15). There are a number of weaknesses in the keys. To mention but one, on p. 149, under "Non-breeding plumage of visiting dotterels," the Double-banded, Mongolian and Large Dotterels are grouped under "Rump whitish, contrasting with back" and not keyed further, whereas these species, especially the last two, are readily separable in the field; the most conspicuous feature, the marked difference in bill size between the Mongolian and Large Dotterels being mentioned in neither key nor text. The "rump whitish" is misleading, for all three species have the rump dark in the centre, whitish at the sides.

The sections on recognition are brief and not always adequate; those on description are concise but usually sufficient—however, there are a number of species that are most inadequately covered, e.g. the

Common and Arctic Terns, of which the non-breeding plumage (that most likely to be seen in Australia) does not even get a mention. Some descriptions are misleading, e.g. that of the Double-banded Dotterel gives one the impression that the bird has a black throat rather than breast band.

Several introduced species are not included, the Ostrich and Red Bishop being two which are on the South Australian list; and information about others is inaccurate, e.g. the S.A. range of the Blackbird is given merely as "vicinity of Adelaide," whilst S.A. is not included in the range of the Indian Myna, which also extends much further north than central Queensland.

A number of errors have crept in, e.g. on p. 459 the Olive-backed Oriole is referred to as Green-backed Oriole. Others are mentioned by Jarman in his review in *The Bird Observer*, February 1974.

The 300 distribution maps cover almost 450 species and races. I have studied these for South Australian distribution only; there are numerous inaccuracies but fewer than in Slater's *Field Guide to Australian Birds, Non-Passerines*.

Macdonald has combined quite a few genera, e.g. all terns except noddies in *Sterna*; *Tribonyx*, *Porphyrio* and *Amaurornis* are placed in *Gallinula*; all miners in *Manorina*. In these he follows Storr, 1973 *List of Queensland Birds*. In addition *Hylacola* is placed in *Sericornis* and *Acanthagenys* in *Anthochaera*.

At the species level the taxonomy can only be described as inconsistent. Many so-called "semi-species," considered by Condon, 1969, *Handlist of the Birds of South Australia* and most modern taxonomists as races, are given specific status, even if hybridization occurs when they meet. Thus we find accepted as species *Vanellus novaehollandiae*, *Trichoglossus rubritorquis*, *Platycercus flaveolus*, *Psephotus narethae*, *Sericornis maculatus*, *Malurus assimilis*, *Eopsaltria griseogularis*, *Colluricincla brunnea* and *rufiventris*, 3 *Falcunculus* spp., 5 *Neositta* spp., *Zosterops gouldi*, 3 *Gymnorhina* spp. and others. These views will no doubt find favour with many field workers.

Yet all currawongs (*Strepera*), including the two endemic Tasmanian forms, are placed in either *graculina* or *versicolor*; *Chlamydera guttata* and *Cinclosoma alisteri*, accepted as full species by Condon, are relegated to subspecies.

Amytornis modestus is treated as a race of *textilis*, and *burnelli* is given specific status, in contrast to Condon, but probably the closer relationship.

There have been a number of changes from accepted vernacular names, e.g. White-eyed Honeyeater for *Phylidonyris novaehollandiae*, which is already known as Yellow-winged, White-bearded and New Holland Honeyeater; and the various races of *Barnardius* become either Eastern or Western Ringneck.

Peter Slater's colour plates are of high standard, although in a few cases some colours seem to have suffered somewhere between painter and printer; his line drawings are also, in general, very good.

Whilst not wishing to appear too critical of this book, which, admittedly, is only claimed to be a summary of information, there is little in it that cannot be found in Slater's *Field Guide* (for non-passerines—and presumably passerines when this appears), plus, say, the old standby of Cayley's *What Bird Is That?* As an aid to identification there are far too many omissions; too many species are glossed over to treat it as a handbook, although the style and format would make an excellent basis on which to build a real,

and desperately needed, *Handbook of the Birds of Australia*, as was done for Britain by Witherby et al. as long ago as 1940.

I feel that, if finance is a major consideration, the bird observer who is mainly interested in correct identification would be better off investing in Slater's *Field Guide to Australian Birds*, the second volume of which should be available shortly. Nevertheless, Macdonald's book does contain a great deal of information in one volume, and should not be ignored by anyone interested in assembling the better books on Australian birds.

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