

BOOK REVIEWS

HANDBOOK OF BIRDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES by Alan K. Morris, A. R. McGill and Glenn Holmes, 1981. Sydney: New South Wales Field Ornithologists Club. Pp. 80, maps 3. 235 by 179 mm. \$7.50.

New South Wales has been one of the last Australian States or Territories to have its bird-life adequately treated in a regional handlist or other ornithological work. Morris, McGill and Holmes have rectified this deficiency. Their Handlist is brief, simply presented and appears to have been styled on the regional works of G. M. Storr (e.g. *Birds of the Northern Territory*, 1977). The authors state that they have aimed to summarize knowledge of breeding season, distribution, habitat preference, abundance and movements of the State's birds.

Breeding season is neatly presented as months in which eggs have been found, while habitat preference commentary, which is pitched at the level of vegetation formation (e.g. mallee, rainforest and shrubland), is useful. The State is divided into 17 regions which are used to define broadly the range of each species. Localities are then given to proscribe the known limits of each species' distribution. Thus the authors' aims have been ably fulfilled with respect to these three topics.

Abundance is described qualitatively using rare, scarce, uncommon, moderately common, common and abundant. Unfortunately the authors attempt to equate these adjectives with a numerical scale of abundance. Thus, 'rare' denotes that less than 100 individuals of a species occur in the State at any one time, 'scarce' 100 to 1000, and so on up to greater than 1,000,000 for 'abundant'. Without having based these estimates on a rigorous and State-wide census programme, such attempts to quantify abundance, although admirable, are totally unrealistic. The descriptive terms alone are appropriate in view of the limited information presently available regarding population sizes of Australian birds.

The subject of movements is treated with the caution due to this much neglected field of Australian ornithology. However, comments are disappointingly brief and confined to vague statements such as partial nomad and visitor, and unless a species is popularly recognized as exhibiting migratory behaviour, dates of residence or absence are not given for the relevant regions. This contrasts with the courageous approach adopted by S. A. Parker *et al.* and G. M. Storr in their regional works covering

South Australia and the Kimberley Division of Western Australia respectively. Parker *et al.* have obviously analysed records from different parts of South Australia in fine detail, and they have discerned some previously unnoticed (or at least unpublished) local movements as well as drawing some bold conclusions about the seasonal status of other species. Undoubtedly time will prove some of their conclusions to be wrong or only partially correct, but the approach allows amateur birdwatchers to contribute usefully to this field and, hopefully, to be stimulated to publish their observations whether supportive or contradictory. Only in this manner will our knowledge of the movements of Australian birds increase more rapidly than it has in the past.

The Handlist is not intended to be a taxonomic work, yet the authors have still had their "two bob's worth" on contentious issues such as the specific status or otherwise of the Yellow Rosella, Chestnut-breasted Quail-thrush, and the members of the Striated Pardalote complex. In each case they have raised the respective taxa to specific rank and by implication, they predict that with further research, the races of *Calamanthus* will likewise be given specific rank. Although a popular move with many birdwatchers (including myself), the placement of *Calamanthus*, the *Hylacolas* and the Red-throat in genera distinct from that of *Scrubwrens* *Sericornis* will be frowned upon by the systematists. In no cases are these taxonomic changes argued for or otherwise justified by the authors, and so they are best ignored.

Vernacular names do not wholly conform with the R.A.O.U.'s "Recommended English Names for Australian Birds." Some differences stem from the Handlist's taxonomy, but disturbingly eponymous names have been discarded when "alternatives are available". Morris *et al.* give no explanation for this decision which certainly does require one; furthermore they do not apply the rule consistently. They use Japanese and Ground for Latham's (Snipe) and White's (Thrush) respectively, while persisting with Horsefield's Bronze-Cuckoo when Rufous-tailed has been widely used as an alternative name. The erection of Black-bellied Babbler to replace Hall's Babbler is unwarranted and will only create more confusion. Further to this, Hall's Babbler does not have a black belly and it would be a great shame to prevent the commemoration of the late Harold Hall, an Australian gentleman who made such an invaluable

contribution to Australian ornithology. Lastly, any departure from the "Recommended Names", except on taxonomic grounds, is to be deplored.

I detected no typographical errors without conducting an exhaustive search. However, future editions should have the three maps placed in their proper sequence (figure 2 follows figure 3) and all aligned the same way (figure 2 is orientated in the opposite direction to the preceding two). A gazeteer would also improve future editions of this Handlist for the benefit of those people who do not have access to the Reader's Digest Atlas of Australia.

Many South Australian bird observers will find this publication a useful addition to their library at little expense, and it is invaluable for those of us who regularly frequent the western districts of New South Wales. The authors refer to the lack of published observations from parts of western New South Wales, and from my own observations I know that the western range limits given for some species are incorrect, e.g., Noisy Friarbird and Brown Honeyeater. South Australians can usefully deploy some of their birdwatching time in the western districts and publish their observations.

In summary, I commend this publication for its succinct and adequate coverage of the distribution of the birds of New South Wales, but I suggest that the authors should have addressed themselves more fully to bird movements, and either made the Handlist a taxonomic work or left taxonomic considerations entirely alone.

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