

## BOOK REVIEWS

**THE ATLAS OF AUSTRALIAN BIRDS** by M. Blakers, S.J.J.F. Davies and P.N. Reilly, 1984. Melbourne University Press : Melbourne. Hardback, 285 mm x 210 mm; 738 pp with numerous b. & w. illustrations and maps. \$A49.

I commend the format and layout of this book in general. The introductory chapter encompasses the history of the *Atlas*, details the scheme's origin, background and pilot studies, and clarifies how records were accrued, documented, vetted and computerized. The maps of Australia's climatic regions, vegetation associations, bioclimatic regions and zoogeographical barriers are also explained. Instructions on the interpretation of species-maps in the main part of the book are easy to follow.

The principal section covers 656 species and includes all native as well as introduced breeding species and regular migrants. It includes 646 vignettes, 648 maps and accompanying text. A number of problematic birds are combined e.g. Swamp Quail *Coturnix ypsilophora* and Brown Quail *C. australis*; Crimson, Yellow and Adelaide Rosellas under *Platycercus elegans*; Little Bronze-Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx 'malayanus'* and Gould's Bronze-Cuckoo *C. russatus*. The text accompanying each bird comprises brief notes on subspecies, range, movements, environmental and other regulatory factors, status and abundance, and is fully referenced throughout by a numbering system that allows uninterrupted reading. In addition, 103 uncommon and vagrant species are briefly commented upon and historical maps of 38 species previously discussed show changes in their distribution over the three periods pre-1901, 1901-1950 and 1951-1976.

The vignettes take up little space, are informative and in most cases depict the environs in which each species could be expected to be found. Where the technique of light stippling or hatching has been employed vignettes are of a higher standard than those reproduced in darker tones such as the Sooty Oystercatcher, Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo and White-winged Chough. Although most portrayals are artistically excellent (Brown Falcon, Crested Pigeon, the rosellas and *Neophema* parrots, kingfishers in general, Yellow-breasted Boat-bill), others are poor (Swift Parrot, the genera

*Cuculus* and *Ninox*, Barn Owl and Gibberbird).

For uniformity, it is gratifying to see the utilization of the Recommended English Names for Australian Birds (*Emu* Vol 78 : suppl.). Admittedly, there has been much controversy over changes of English names and I for one don't agree with them all. However, these alterations seem to be here to stay and in future will help to form a common bond between amateur and professional ornithologists alike, whether conversing in the field or in publications. Likewise, the authors have followed for consistency the taxonomy and nomenclature of Condon's *Checklist of the Birds of Australia, Part 1, Non-Passerines* and Schodde's *Interim List of Australian Songbirds*. On the other hand, discussion of specific status and subspecific variation should have been excluded from the text. Information such as this would have been best left for the much-awaited *Checklist of Australian Birds*. As it is, a number of conclusions in the *Atlas* are unsubstantiated or incorrectly accredited. For example, the trinomials for the Sulphur-crested Cockatoo *Cacatua galerita* are referred to Forshaw & Cooper (*Australian Parrots*, 1981) instead of to the original reference (Forshaw, J.M. 1968. *Emu* 67 : 267-282). Also, the discussion of geographical variation within the Peaceful Dove *Geopelia placida* is referred to the three individual works of Hall, Condon and Frith (see references 748, 388 and 659 respectively) all of which use the binomial *Geopelia striata*. This is misleading and there is no mention that the name-change for *striata* was based on Harrison's 1969 paper in *Emu* 69 : 66-71.

The text is disappointing in that it predominantly presents already well-documented data on the biology of Australian birds. This information would have been synthesized more appropriately in the proposed *Handbook of Australian Birds*. Alternatively, the authors could have used space more profitably by elaborating on new information from the *Atlas* scheme and other details of distribution and status. For example, one can only regret that the *Atlas* includes four records of the Night Parrot all of which are without details of identification criteria, numbers seen, habitat and precise localities.

Allowing for the bias discussed on page 35 of the *Atlas*, the maps themselves, which form the

cornerstone of the *Atlas*, are adequate. They offer an overview of each species' distribution, although they could have been more informative in outlining seasonal movements. Differently coloured dots could have been used to show whether a species is sedentary or to indicate summer and winter ranges. The breeding data are somewhat misleading because whole circles have been coloured in and this can suggest very high numbers of breeding records, which in some species in some areas are hard to imagine. A more realistic approach would have been to fill in only a percentage of each circle to indicate the proportion of breeding records received for a particular square.

The historical maps are of much interest, especially where they are substantiated by adequately documented records, as is the case for man- and self-introduced species e.g. Cattle Egret. This, however, cannot be said for a number of less accessible and more secretive native species recorded prior to 1901 and even up to 1950, because the information is biased by the lack of early observers and documentation of records. In such cases these maps are inadequate for conveying any real degree of accuracy of either contraction or expansion of ranges or abundance. The historical maps are most informative for species such as the Maned

Duck, Crested Pigeon and Little Corella. Another good example, which was excluded, would have been the Galah.

Perhaps the approximately 3,000 atlasers, volunteers and others who contributed to the *Atlas* scheme should have been offered a more reasonable pre-publication price than \$43.50. Also an additional sum of seven dollars has to be outlaid for the purchase of six transparencies of maps featured in the introductory chapter, for without these one cannot reap the full benefit of the *Atlas* maps. These transparencies should have at least been included within the price of the book.

In conclusion, the completion of the mammoth tasks of corresponding with compilers of records, co-ordinating and completing the *Atlas* maps of all the Australian species should be applauded. The volunteers who gave their services and time in vetting observations and preparing the maps deserve a special mention here. Apart from the shortcomings mentioned above, this publication would be a welcome addition to any ornithologist's library. I hope that it will stimulate similar schemes in the future and form a foundation of species-distributions for the Australian *Checklist* and proposed *Handbook of Australian Birds*.

IAN J. MASON