

BOOK REVIEWS

THE BIRDS OF AUSTRALIA — A BOOK OF IDENTIFICATION, edited by Ken Simpson, illustrated by Nicolas Day, published by Lloyd O'Neil Pty Ltd, 1984; pp 352; numerous col. and b. and w. illust. and maps. Size 287 x 208 mm. \$A35.95.

This book is both a field guide and a compact, up-to-date reference book of Australian ornithology. Its rather large size will make it a little cumbersome in the field but this in no way detracts from the value of the book.

The first and larger part of the book, the *Field Information*, is a guide to the identification of the 758 species and, where appropriate, distinctive subspecies of Australian birds, including many recorded as vagrants. Beginning with a Key to Families illustrated by Jeremy Boot, this section has as its core approximately 130 colour plates. Opposite each plate are brief descriptions of the illustrated species including notes on immatures, distinctive field marks,

voice and habitat; distribution maps show breeding and non-breeding ranges and directions of migration. Finally, numerous black and white sketches show flight patterns, facial detail, postures that, in the field, sometimes make identification difficult, characteristic modes of behaviour and so on.

The second part of the book is termed *The Handbook*. It begins with highly readable accounts of avian life cycles, Australian habitats, fossil birds and modern avifaunal regions. The last does not include reference to the modifications of Baldwin Spencer's now classical system proposed by Schodde and Calaby (*Bridge and Barrier : the Natural and Cultural History of Torres Strait*). It then presents accounts of each family of birds in Australia and most of these are organized to include comments on relationships, ecology, behaviour and breeding biology.

Inside the front cover are a folding map of Australia and a guide to the book's use. On the

map, more geographical features could have been indicated and the Gibson Desert has been misnamed the Great Victoria Desert. Inside the back cover are life-size outlines of seabird bills. A Glossary of terms used in the book is also included.

Ken Simpson has edited the text, which has been written by 45 authors including himself.

The book is impressively up-to-date in terms of its species-coverage. Not only is it the first reference book of ornithology to illustrate in colour the recently described Cox's Sandpiper *Calidris paramelanotos* and Eungella Honeyeater *Lichenostomus hindwoodi* (*Gerygone ruficauda* described by J. Ford and R. Johnstone in the *Western Australian Naturalist*, 1983, is not included) but numerous species recorded in Australia only as vagrants have been illustrated in colour — we counted at least 19 in a brief search. Although some species first recorded as vagrants are now known to be regular visitors to Australia e.g. Barn Swallow, we query the point of illustrating vagrants among regularly recorded species. They may best be treated separately from the main plates.

The book's taxonomy incorporates some recent work such as the removal of the White-throated Treecreeper (*sensu lato*) from *Climacteris* to *Cormobates*, the splitting of the Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo and Sooty Owl complexes each into two species, but not others such as the now accepted use of the names *Burhinus grallarius* and *Eurostopodus argus* for the Bush Thick-knee and Spotted Nightjar respectively. A taxonomic addition of interest to South Australian readers and worth including in the *Handbook* in later editions concerns the extinct Kangaroo Island Emu *Dromaius baudinianus*, which was recently demonstrated to be distinct from the King Island Emu (see Parker, S.A., *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists Club*, 1984).

In the *Handbook's* notes on relationships it is most pleasing to see frequent reference to the DNA hybridization studies of Charles Sibley and his colleagues. We suspect, however, that many readers would appreciate a brief explanation of both DNA and the technique of DNA hybridization in either the main text or Glossary. References to three important papers recently published by Storrs Olson and his colleagues in the series *Smithsonian Contributions to Zoology* might be included in later editions.

They argue that:

- the theory of gallinaceous (fowl-like) origins of waterfowl can be abandoned in favour of shorebird-like origins, — *cf* p. 291,
- the Plains-Wanderer is a charadriiform bird and not at all closely related to button-quail, — *cf* p. 297 and
- the Banded Stilt, although a recurvirostrid, is a unique bird and is the closest living relative of the flamingos.

Not all of the references in the accounts of families are fully cited. Despite Simpson's admission of this (p. 283) it seems a lazy inconsistency that may leave the reader frustrated in some cases (e.g. Treecreepers Climacteridae) where specific references are cited by author and year only. Some accounts of families contain no references at all, and not through lack of pertinent material.

An excellent feature of the *Handbook* is the use of bar diagrams to summarize known breeding seasons of many species although we wonder how reliable they will be for some little-known species.

Plates

The plates are perhaps the most important part of any identification guide. Those by Nicolas Day in the present book deserve abundant praise. For the species we know, they are mostly quite accurate (see below). In short, they are far and away the best illustrations in any field guide to Australian birds and are the strongpoint of the book. Pleasingly, the individual illustrations of each bird are much larger than in other guides.

The birds are shown in life-like attitudes rather than in the line-up that one often sees in field guides. Distinctive features are arrowed and the plates are mostly not cluttered. We are appreciative of the care that has evidently gone into choosing a suitable background colour for the plates.

Adult and immature, breeding and eclipse plumages and flight appearances are often shown. Some of the suggestions made in this journal's review of Graham Pizzey's *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia* for illustrations to include in future field guides (*S. Aust. Orn.* 28 : 194) remain appropriate although one is catered for *i.e.* bitterns in flight.

We are especially pleased to see good illustrations of the Purple-gaped Honeyeater, immature (not juvenile as captioned) Grey Shrike-

thrush and female Crested Bellbird. The first-named is not often well-illustrated, whereas the other two are peculiar birds that one often has to look twice at.

It is clear that the Sooty Albatross and Little Grassbird are depicted twice to help one differentiate them from similar but not necessarily closely-related species; one would not have thought this to be the reason for repetition of the Yellow-legged Flycatcher and the two subspecies of the Grey Whistler on pp 179 and 185. Innovative is the illustration of the so-called Brown Currawong of Eyre and Yorke (not York as printed on p. 268) Peninsulas.

The following are more specific comments on the Plates:

1. Transpositions have occurred with the head profiles of the Cape and Snow Petrels and the labels of the forms *haematorrhous* and *naethae* of the Blue Bonnet.
2. Scales are sometimes inconsistent and hence confusing e.g. Pied Heron and Little Egret both appear too large in flight.
3. Soft parts and shapes of egrets inadequate. Non-breeding Cattle Egret has distinctive grey, not yellowish, legs; Great Egret has pink upper leg when breeding;
4. The diagnostic flight silhouette of Freckled Ducks with drooped neck could be illustrated and individual feathers have longitudinal spots not transverse bars — useful when identifying stray feathers.
5. Male Blue-billed Ducks display whitish not brown undertail flashes.
6. Wings of Square-tailed Kite are broader distally and more prominently fingered than those of Black Kite.
7. Bush Hen seems overall too dark.
8. The two wedgebills are not identical in plumage (see Ford & Parker *Emu* 73 : 113).
9. Black-eared Miner is too light.
10. Spotted Bowerbird is far too dark.
11. Tails of grasswrens and woodswallows are arguably too short, though this is not likely to cause problems in identification.
12. Legs of the Starling should be bright pinkish-red.

Distribution Maps

The distribution maps are mostly adequate and up-to-date but nonetheless far from perfect. For example, recent South Australian records of the Redshank and Yellow Chat are indicated but the population of the Grey Grasswren north of Birdsville is not. The

following are more specific comments on the maps:

1. Maps for Franklin's and Sabine's Gulls have been transposed as have those for the Royal and Yellow-billed Spoonbills.
2. Many records of the Plumed Whistling-Duck from South and Western Australia omitted.
3. Osprey omitted from River Murray in South Australia and erroneously included in inland southern Western Australia.
4. The Musk Lorikeet is indicated as occurring on Kangaroo Island in this book and in the *Atlas of Australian Birds*. Being skeptical of the few old records of this species from the Island, we urge observers with later records to publish them with full descriptions.
5. South Australian record of the Grey Wagtail has been omitted.
6. The population of the Western Gerygone on lower Eyre Peninsula has been omitted.
7. The population of Little Woodswallows reported in this journal in 1974 from near Iron Knob has been recorded subsequently on numerous occasions (mostly in spring and summer) and seems worthy of indication.
8. The Red Bishop almost certainly no longer occurs in South Australia and should be deleted from field guides.
9. Ranges excessive: Letter-winged Kite, Square-tailed Kite (which should, however, be included in south-western Western Australia), Black-breasted Buzzard, Pied Butcherbird.
10. Ranges restrictive: Hooded Plover, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Little Egret, godwits, Pectoral Sandpiper.
11. Dots or open circles would be better used for vagrant species rather than hatching.

Where distinctive subspecies are mentioned in the text opposite the Plates, their distributions are usually indicated, but not, unfortunately, for all such cases e.g. Grey Fantail.

All in all, this book is to be highly recommended either as a first field guide to Australian birds or as a valuable complement to the other recently published field guides and reference books of Australian ornithology.

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