

## BOOK REVIEW

**HANDBOOK OF AUSTRALIAN, NEW ZEALAND & ANTARCTIC BIRDS, Volume 3: Snipe to Pigeons** Edited by P.J. Higgins and S.J.J.F. Davies. Oxford University Press Melbourne, 1996. 1028 pages, 129 species, distribution maps, sonagrams, black & white illustrations, 60 colour plates. Retail \$325, RAOU Members \$295.

This third volume of HANZAB marks the halfway point of the RAOU's ambitious project to research and publish everything known about the birds of Australia, New Zealand and Antarctica. It also deals with many of the migratory waders and the Gulls and Terns – groups often of interest to enthusiastic birders. That over 1000 pages account for some 120 species (plus brief accounts of another 10 species not conclusively recorded) indicates the enormous amount of information included.

A five page introduction explains the format and any ways in which Volume 3 differs in this respect from its two predecessors. Commendably the taxonomy and nomenclature of Christidis and Boles (1994) has been followed even though this, in itself, has caused a problem. Under this arrangement the Scolopacidae should have been dealt with in Volume 2, so are now out of order. No doubt other taxonomic alterations will occur as time passes but the aim to move with current changes where practicable is laudable. These introductory pages need to be read thoroughly by anyone wishing to understand all aspects of the text which otherwise can be complicated.

Generalised accounts, with appropriate referencing, at the commencement of each family and sub-family, explain the morphological, behavioural and DNA research and portend implications for the future classification of the groups. The reasons for adopting the sequence used are explained. The species' accounts comprise up to 20 main segments and some of these are further divided into sub-headings, e.g. breeding can comprise up to 10 or more sub-headings like Season, Incubation, Eggs, Fledging Success. Yet further information on pair-bonding, copulation etc. is dealt with in Social Organisation and Social Behaviour. The format is consistent so that anyone studying an aspect of various species' lifestyles can access such information fairly readily.

So how does this admirable framework perform? The initial paragraph on Nomenclature is excellent, explaining the scientific name and details of subspecies where applicable; subspecific variation being further expanded in the Geographical Variation section near the close of each treatise. I found the important section on Field Identification disappointing. The initial paragraph often only partly presents the key identifying features. It is followed by lengthy and difficult to read feather-by-feather descriptions of different plumage phases, before reaching a segment where comparison with similar species elicits further differentiating points. Sometimes the reader is referred to a comparison given under another species for that information. Few I feel would use this volume for identification when so many modern field guides are much more clear and concise.

The segment on Habitat is good, summarising the

main types and giving referenced listings of those considered abnormal or marginal. Distribution and Population is the section which probably evokes most general interest, giving details of breeding distribution in the Northern Hemisphere and wintering distributions in the South where applicable. In Australia, state-by-state distributions are given and, with rare species, all records are listed. Attempts are made to deem whether these are acceptable or not, but this is not strongly stated, e.g. Grey Phalarope in HANZAB details four acceptable records then lists three others which are unverified. Commenting on a recent Bool Lagoon sighting, the *Bird Observer* states "HANZAB records seven previous reports from Australia". More galling are instances of HANZAB perpetuating information already shown to be erroneous or mapping records it has pointed out as unacceptable. This segment contains maps of both worldwide distribution where applicable and HANZAB area distribution. South Australia is poorly served here, e.g. under Red Knot on p. 227, despite the text saying "Rarely in SE; mostly from The Coorong, N and W to Yorke Pen. and Port Pirie. On Eyre Pen., recorded Port Augusta, and from s. Eyre Pen. to Streaky Bay", the map is blank except for the Pt Lincoln and Streaky Bay areas. Eyre Peninsula was lucky there. It is badly dealt with for several other species. Other states, too, are far from perfect, and the Australian maps appear to have been either hastily done or drafted by individuals lacking geographical knowledge. The population information is interesting. While based largely on the estimates of Watkins (1993), details are given of sites of importance and major concentrations recorded.

Another important segment is Movements. Here the amount of data presented is often confusing and difficult to assess, e.g. under Red-necked Stint on p. 263, it says "First arrive, late Aug.; large numbers first appear early Sept." Yet further on "Recorded arriving Tas. as early as July and as late as Jan." No doubt some of this confusion is caused by numbers of birds wintering in northern Australia and returning south earlier than Northern Hemisphere breeders or even by erratic movements of birds wintering in southern localities, but such is not mentioned. The sub-section on banding and colour-marking details the work done and the way this has helped trace movements and important fly-way staging places. A surprise is the failure to mention how the Crested Pigeon has colonised practically all of S. A.'s settled areas during this century.

Extensive lists of known food items are given,

while the segments on Voice include sonagrams for the benefit of those who work in that field. Social Organisation and Social Behaviour are very thorough for some of the Skuas and Gulls. Most of the Columbidae have some depth due mainly to the work of Goodwin and Frith, but it was pleasing to see that the significant contribution by aviculturists to the knowledge of courtship and breeding of this family had not been overlooked.

The segments on Plumages, Bare Parts, Moults, Measurements, Weight, Structure and Ageing are lengthy and mainly of interest to those who deal with birds in the hand. The accounts end with an extensive list of References, which while containing most major references, is by no means exhaustive. Those hidden in articles featuring another species seem to have often escaped detection.

Finally, the illustrations are generally excellent. The depiction of waders has improved immeasurably over the last two decades and the fact that several artists assisted indicates the wealth of talent in this field. Only Plate 44, opposite p. 705, fell short of the high standard. I found some of the illustrations there disappointing, but far worse was the error in its captioning for Nos. 5-7 and 8-12, where Black Tern and White-winged Black Tern have been transposed. The overall placement of the plates is puzzling, for seldom is a bird depicted within its own text.

The high price and heavy nature of much of the text makes this a book which few would aspire to own. Many will, however, consult this volume at some stage with regard to particular species or aspects of ornithology. Its value to editors should be inestimable and it will be useful for pointing out areas of further research to those patient enough to seek them out. When one sees the effort that has been put into banding for a limited, but vital, return in knowledge, the satellite-tracking of larger waders looms as an alluring prospect. The Japanese Snipe population in Japan is given as 37 000, yet in Vic., Tas. and S.A. the summer population is estimated at 15 000. Furthermore the cessation of hunting in Vic. and Tas. in 1983-84, estimated at 7000 annually, resulted in only a slight increase in population. Surely more work is needed to elucidate this species' status. There is inadvertent humour when on p. 928 the Squatter Pigeon is said to have been "formally hunted much...". No details of etiquette were given.

Few, I feel, will read this book for pleasure. Hopefully though, libraries will find it a necessary inclusion to enable us all to access its mountain of information when the occasion demands.

JOHN ECKERT