

## BOOK REVIEWS

*FIELD GUIDE TO AUSTRALIAN BIRDS* by Michael Morcombe. Steve Parish Publishing, Archerfield Qld, 2000. 448 pages, \$39rrp.

Michael Morcombe has worked actively and passionately for fourteen years in creating a worthy rival to the leading Australian bird field guides. Morcombe not only produced the text and distribution maps for 850 bird species recorded in Australia and its island territories, he drew the 3400 illustrations. A truly admirable achievement.

Features which separate the guide from others include a large section profiling the nests and eggs of Australian birds, and graduated distribution maps in three shades that show core areas, usual ranges, and vagrant or former ranges of species and subspecies. Flaps on the front and back covers serve to temporarily bookmark a page of interest, which can be handy in the field, particularly in windy conditions. The back flap also provides a colour-coded list of bird families which is aligned with colour-codings on the pages of the book. This quick-find system is designed for people who tend to flick (often back and forth) through bird books to locate a bird rather than using indexes. Linked to the colour-coded system is a page of characteristic bird shapes which guides fledgling birdwatchers on a path to the family and eventually the bird in which they are interested.

In terms of field-worthiness, the book is at the large and heavy end of the field guide scale, being of similar weight and dimensions to Pizzey and Knight (1997), and has an adequately durable, but not weatherproof, cover.

The early sections of the book include explanations of how to use this book, plumage and bird characteristics, and the species distribution map system. Concluding sections include a glossary, a bibliography, indexes of scientific and common names and notes on migrant waders (Ramsar, East Asian–Australasian Flyway, and a map and description of 26 important wader locations in Australia), recently extinct Australian birds, new records for Australia, birdwatching techniques, research and conservation groups.

The main section, which details Australian birds, has illustrations on the page opposite its description and distribution map. The descrip-

tions for each species include common and scientific name, size, island territory codes, behaviour, voice, similar species, habitat and status. Taxonomic order generally follows Christidis and Boles (1994). One to seven species are presented on a page, with similar-looking birds occurring on the same page to aid identification. The text is readable, accurate and interlaced with Morcombe's observations and interpretations indicating first-hand knowledge and appreciation of many of the species presented. 'Status' includes a conservation rating for threatened taxa, which I think is essential for modern field guides.

The graduated distribution maps are an excellent idea. The three shades indicate where a bird is likely, moderately- or less-likely to occur. By looking at the core areas (darkly shaded) for a range of birds you may deduce, on a broad scale, the bird hot-spots for birdwatching trips, or more importantly for conservation purposes. The same sized map of Australia is used for each species, resulting in some obscure fly-spots on maps where species have limited distributions. Why not zoom in with a map of Tasmania for the Tasmanian endemic birds or the Top End for the three subspecies of Sandstone Shrike-thrush *Colluricincla woodwardi*, for example? This criticism applies to all the major Australian field guides, but is highlighted in the case of Morcombe because his maps present more information than the others.

The pages of bird pictures are idiosyncratic and perhaps will be the feature which most polarises users into love or hate categories. The illustrations are annotated with small-fonted text which relates to the identifying features of a bird. At times the illustrations float in a sea of text. This may suit users who like to wade at leisure through snippets of information, while those more time-pressed may become frustrated. For example, there are six illustrations of the Australasian Grebe *Tachybaptus novaehollandiae* on p. 31 which include breeding, non-breeding and juvenile birds. The captions for each (e.g. 'Breeding') are difficult to find among the annotations. Some of the annotations relate to features which may uniquely identify that species, others provide information of general interest, e.g. 'toes have wide flat lobes', or point out features which are not unique, e.g. 'white wing

panel' is mentioned for both the Australasian Grebe and Hoary-headed Grebe *Poliiocephalus poliocephalus*. The annotations, therefore, do not serve as fail-safe short cuts to correctly identifying species.

Each species illustrated is delineated by a stippled line and this system allows for some interesting arrangements of birds. For example, on p. 207 the Common Paradise-Kingfisher *Tanysiptera galatea* appears between several Buff-breasted Paradise-Kingfishers *T. sylvia*. This may be misleading to the hasty user, but is compensated for by the fine display of their elongated tail-feathers.

Morcombe's artwork varies from some honest efforts where I feel he has not quite captured the jizz of a bird, to some splendid presentations such as the nightjars on p. 202. In terms of light and shade, the author explains that the illustrations are painted as if seen under the diffused light of a thinly overcast sky, and this is generally the case. Some features of the birds appear more richly coloured than expected, such as the rump of the Brown Thornbill *Acanthiza pusilla*, and may contribute to mis-identification in the field. Colourful birds such as the parrots, kingfishers and bowerbirds are particularly vibrant, which many users will find appealing.

An extensive section on breeding, nests and eggs follows the main text, which deliberately mentioned breeding only in terms of plumage and display. (Users who are interested in all the breed-

ing information for a species in the book will need to refer both sections which are cross-referenced.) The breeding section begins with introductory sketches of the main styles of nests and shapes of eggs, and some guidelines for limiting observer impacts around nests. It then describes for each Australian bird species details of breeding such as the time of year, roles of the adults, incubation period, clutch size and descriptions of nests and eggs. Appealing little sketches accompany the text. I feel the section would be enhanced by providing the same details and sketches for introduced birds to reduce the likelihood of mis-identifying nests in the field.

Intrepid birdwatchers may find the next section on the birds of Australia's island territories most useful. Included are the Torres Strait and Ashmore Reef, Christmas and Cocos-Keeling Islands, Norfolk Island, Lord Howe Island, and Macquarie and Heard Islands.

I recommend Morcombe's guide as a consideration for purchase because of its considerable depth and uniqueness.

#### REFERENCES

- Christidis, L. and Boles, W.E. 1994. The taxonomy and species of birds of Australia and its territories. RAOU Monograph 2, RAOU, Melbourne.  
 Pizzey, G. and Knight, F. 1997. *The field guide to the birds of Australia*. Harper Collins, Sydney.

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