

Book Review

The Australian Bird Guide

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Paperback, 576 pages, numerous
illustrations and maps.*

In recent years birdwatchers in Australia have been treated to a range of impressive bird-related publications from CSIRO Publishing. Quality of production and accuracy have been hallmarks of these works. This offering is no exception and will be eagerly added to the bookshelves of serious birders.

You may be thinking: do we need another bird book for Australia? I believe the answer is yes, primarily on two counts: firstly because it is as up to date with new research findings and data on distribution as currently possible, and secondly because of the comprehensive coverage of species likely to be found in Australia.

Pages 1 to 28 provide a detailed explanation of how the book was set up, how editorial decisions were made, how species accounts are structured, identifying birds, feathers and moults, ethical birding and many other related issues leading to successful birdwatching. All of this is supported by detailed coloured and labelled illustrations.



Dr Leo Joseph has provided a concise, very readable article, on the evolution and classification of Australian birds due to scientific research into DNA and systematics. I am sure that most of us who have been birdwatching for many years need to be prepared for a few shocks such as Falcons being related closely to Parrots! The authors have made use of these advances to develop the structure of this guide.

The guide covers over 900 species. Of this number 747 are breeding residents, 29 are introduced and about 160 are vagrants. Many of the vagrants have turned up on Australian offshore territories as well, of course, as on the Mainland. The fact that these vagrants are well described and illustrated means that the birder on Christmas Island has a good chance of identifying that 'new' bird without having to resort to a library of field guides from other countries.

In the body of the guide the layout follows the accepted pattern of bird notes and distribution maps on opposite pages to the illustrations. The descriptions are highly detailed with notes on size, flight, voice, immature juvenile and adult forms, distribution, and behavioural habits. The authors have drawn extensively from HANZAB and the wealth of knowledge that continually flows in from birdwatchers around the country. The descriptions also have helpful suggestions on how to separate a bird from similar species.

A feature of the book is the illustrations. The three illustrators have had long experience in depicting Australian birds and have contributed illustrations in their fields of expertise. The drawings are clear and arranged to show diagnostic features plus alternate plumages. A feature is the number of illustrations for each species. For example there are nine illustrations for the Roseate Tern covering age, sex, breeding and non-breeding plumage, and flight. Illustrations of other birds include appearance during moult, subspecies and comparisons with closely related species. Similar species are arranged close together to assist in identification. ID features are highlighted by key words and pointers. The 4,700 illustrations represent a massive amount of effort but make identification much easier and more reliable. Needless to say the illustrations are superb in their detail and presentation.

The order in which the species are arranged is somewhat altered from the accepted evolutionary order used in past guides and species are arranged in broad biomes where they are normally encountered. These are marine, freshwater and terrestrial. Within the biomes a taxonomic structure is followed.

The inside front cover features a visual quick reference guide for each biome allowing quick access to the pages covering a particular family or genus. At the back there is a checklist of species. The index gives scientific and common names interspersed in a font large enough for most of us to be able to read in the field. Note that the common names are alphabetical so you will find Crimson Finch followed by Crimson Rosella. Something else to get used to. Recent advice suggests that in the next edition the index will revert to the format that we are used to.

In conclusion this guide is comprehensive in the number of species covered, up to date, provides authoritative detailed descriptions of species, has an excellent coverage of vagrants plus illustrations of high quality. With all this information it is bulkier and heavier than other guides but is still small enough to take with you on your field trips.

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