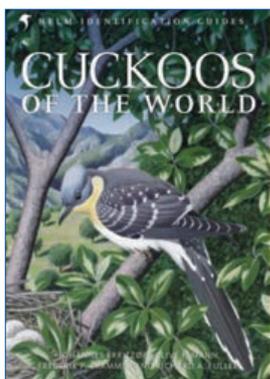


Reviews



Cuckoos of the World

By Johannes Erritzøe, Clive F. Mann, Frederik P. Brammer and Richard A. Fuller

Helm, 2012

Hbk, 544pp; 36 colour plates, many colour photographs

ISBN 978-0-7136-6034-0 Subbuteo code M12049

£60.00 **BB Bookshop price £54.00**

Since this is the third major review of the Cuculidae in the last 15 years, following Bob Payne's work for *HBW* (1997, which recognised 136 species) and his standalone monograph, *The Cuckoos*, in the OUP 'Bird Families of the World' series (Payne 2005, 141 species), purchasers might justifiably expect something special here. Certainly an experienced team of authors was assembled, but do they deliver?

Although most cuckoos have been well covered in field guides, the plates here, by four artists, are very good (and vastly superior to those in Payne 2005). New World species suffer from being reproduced fractionally too small, while the Malagasy couas are scattered over four plates, one well separated from the others (with two species' plate legends reversed), and two South American *Coccyzus* are 'shunted' onto a plate of malkohas, 'orphaned' from their congeners. There is also an admirable selection of photographs (some of them stunning) adorning the species accounts, providing another plus over the Payne monograph (while species coverage exceeds that in *HBW*, gaps remain).

The 144 species accounts comprise sections on Taxonomy, Field Identification, Voice, Description, Biometrics, Moulting, Distribution, Habitat, Behaviour, Breeding, Food, and Status and Conservation. Some are broken into clear subsections, enabling easy access to desired information, where available. Most accounts span 2–5 pages, including photographs and maps. Texts are telegraphic, an often necessary device in field guides, but a more discursive style would be my preference in works of this nature. Some of the abbreviations (explained on p. 26) seem pointless: PNG (Papua New Guinea) is doubtless self-explanatory, but NG (New Guinea) and IC (Ivory Coast), to name two, will be less obvious, and scarcely necessary as space-saving devices. Although the book is well referenced, with a very extensive bibliography, some very lengthy sections

close with an extensive list of relevant citations, making at least some facts difficult to research. The text evidently has been prepared over a long period and certain sections would have benefited from more rigorous editing to ensure their fluidity, and to remove inconsistencies and contradictions.

Undoubtedly a huge amount of work has gone into this book, but the personal touch is often missing, with large quantities of data (including virtually all of the biometrics) lifted wholesale from Payne (2005). Although there is little point in reinventing the wheel, extensive, specimen-based research will often yield useful insights. These authors appear to have relied heavily on personal visits to very few different institutions and, although they assembled a huge body of specimen data to create detailed range maps (available at www.fullerlab.org/cuckoos) on which the book's versions are based, reliance on online or other databases is not ideal. Subspecific taxonomy appears heavily based on the literature, although some references (e.g. for White-browed Coucal *Centropus superciliosus*) have been missed, with little evidence of novel research. Many of the voice sections would have benefited from use of internet forums such as the well-established xeno-canto database. Indeed, online resources, which have the potential to add a whole new dimension to the workload for authors, are rarely cited, as is correspondence with other researchers, despite many fellow ornithologists being thanked on pp. 9–10.

True errors appear rare, but 'slips' are not difficult to locate. A revision of the type locality of the nominate taxon of Rufous-vented Ground Cuckoo *Neomorphus geoffroyi* (Raposo *et al.* 2009; *Zootaxa* 2176: 65–68), which has obviously important implications for nomenclature, was missed. In a plea for reassessment of a Finnish record of Jacobin Cuckoo *Clamator jacobinus*, Lees & Mahood (*Dutch Birding* 33: 325–328) mention several published instances of vagrancy, e.g. in Iran, as well as increasing records in Thailand, which

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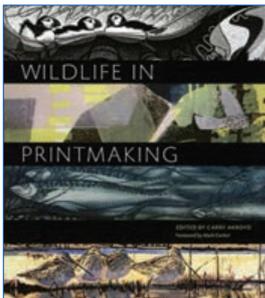


escaped Erritzøe *et al.* It is stated that there is just one confirmed Brazilian record of Mangrove Cuckoo *Coccyzus minor*, but two are mentioned, and additional photographs from other localities are available on www.wikiaves.com.br. A detailed discussion of parasitic behaviour by Common Cuckoos *Cuculus canorus* includes a lengthy list of hosts broken down by region but omits at least one species, Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin *Cercotrichas galactotes*, known in Turkey (Kirwan *et al.* 2008). A symbol employed on some maps goes unexplained on pp. 22–23, although its

meaning is reasonably apparent.

To answer the question I posed in the first paragraph, anyone whose avian interests extend well beyond the Western Palearctic, and who lacks Payne's monograph (which contains substantially more detailed introductory sections), should certainly consider the present work, especially if they do not own *HBW*. But, for those who do, I suspect that the decision concerning this attractive book might rest on the depth of their pockets.

Guy M. Kirwan



Wildlife in Printmaking

Edited by Carry Akroyd

Langford Press, 2011

Hbk, 168pp; full colour throughout

ISBN 978-1-904078-40-1 Subbuteo code M21140

£38.00 **BB Bookshop price £34.00**

At last here is a book dedicated to the artistry of modern wildlife printmaking. OK, there have been one or two artists who have had their works published in their own books, but this is the first to bring many artists and their prints together within the wrappers of one book.

Why the big fanfare then? Wildlife has long struggled to be recognised as a serious subject for art, apart maybe from the cave artists' work that showed their fellows the difference between something that was good to eat and the big toothy-thing that needed to be fled from. Since then virtually all wildlife artistic efforts have been patronisingly labelled as 'chocolate box' pictures. Except, that is, in the field of printmaking. Here, the case is almost opposite, with the natural history audience not always 'getting' the art form and the 'serious' art world more readily acknowledging it. And so with the publication of this work, both sides of this long-running debate now have a chance to fully enjoy this underexposed tract of art.

Within this beautifully presented, large-format book, Carry Akroyd (as editor and fine printmaker herself) has pooled together the works and words of 22 artists. For the most part, each section is a mini-catalogue dedicated to the work of one artist, with three other sections devoted to several artists' interpretations of winter, water, and flower and insects. The prints are a delight to the eye and are ably supported throughout by the texts of each artist, giving us an insight into their various approaches to image-making. Talking of texts, be

sure to read Mark Cocker's slightly quirky foreword.

Essentially, printmaking is the transfer of a medium from one surface to another, inked surface to paper or muddy boot to carpet – you know what I mean. The types of surface involved and the techniques applied to generate marks on the surface is where the real business end of the creative process is to be found. Traditional methods such as etching, wood engraving, linocut and screen printing are explored and explained in detail, with most artists specialising in one method only.

Many *BB* readers will be familiar with the beautiful linocuts of Robert Gillmor (*Preening Pair* 2007), the intricate wood engravings of Colin See-Payton (*Young Otters* 1994) and the big, bold and handsome hand-coloured linocuts of Andrew Haslen (*Spring Woodcock* 2010). If I have to pick out a couple of personal standout images, they would be Robert Greenhalf's *Four Snipe* (2005), Kim Atkinson's *Missel Thrush Calls Rattle Through Winter Woods* (2008), and John Paige's *Spotted Redshanks in June 2004*. However, the beauty of this sort of book is that it showcases works that have long deserved a wider sphere of publicity and with each read you will change your mind as to whose prints you admire the most.

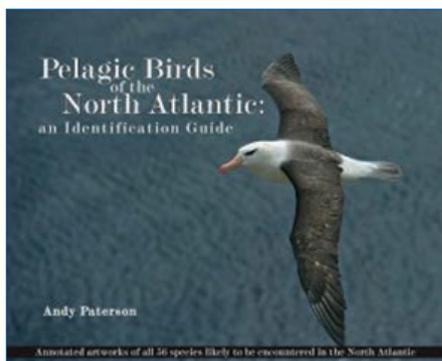
My great expectations for this book have certainly been well met. It is joyful and an outstanding addition to the ever-growing library of wildlife art books published by the Langford Press.

Dan Powell

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Pelagic Birds of the North Atlantic: an identification guide

By Andy Paterson

New Holland, 2012

Pbk, 32pp; 272 black-and-white illustrations

ISBN 978-1-7800-9228-7 Subbuteo code M21314

£9.99 **BB Bookshop price £8.99**

Having recently been absorbed in the excellent *Petrels, Albatrosses and Storm-Petrels of North America* by Steve Howell (2012) (pp. 545–546), I was mindful of his advice on how to see tubenoses. The number of species you might expect on a pelagic day trip may be in the order of only 12–20 (with perhaps only 4–10 tubenoses) and the possibilities can therefore be reviewed easily beforehand. This seems like sound advice; field guides or handbooks inevitably suffer from sea spray and you probably won't have time to thumb through them anyway. But maybe a small waterproof guide covering relatively few species *would* be worth taking to sea, if only as an aide-mémoire. That is the thinking behind this small (approximately A5-sized) publication.

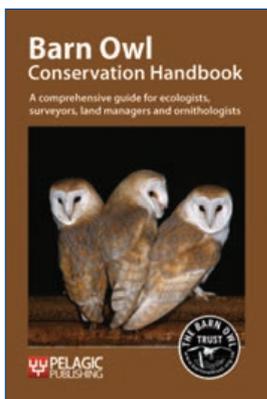
The guide covers the North Atlantic, from the Caribbean and Cape Verde Islands up to the Arctic, and includes 56 species. The selection of species sensibly includes all the tubenoses, tropicbirds, gannets and boobies, auks and skuas you could reasonably expect to see, plus a selection of the more pelagic gulls and terns. Each species has a selection of half-tone drawings, which vary from just two (Swinhoe's Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma monorhis*) to eleven for each of the smaller skuas. I would, however, question the need for nine illustrations of Magnificent Frigatebird *Fregata magnificens* when it is the only frigatebird covered. Identification as a frigatebird species would be straightforward for any pelagic birder but in the eastern Atlantic, where Magnificent is rare, a rare vagrant of a different species would be worth trying to rule out. For some of the illustrations the printing has resulted in some pale to mid-grey tones looking far too washed-out. Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* and Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* suffer badly in this respect with the adults of the latter looking more like Roseate Terns *S. dougallii*. Printing problems aside, the illustrations are not of the standard we now expect from a modern field guide. The shapes of many seabird species impart a distinctive jizz which is rarely conveyed in these

rather diagrammatic drawings.

The drawings are annotated with a series of bullet points giving key identification features. These captions are distinctly sparse. I compared them with those in the *North American Bird Guide* (Sibley 2000), which is known for its relatively economical use of annotations. For Wilson's Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*, to take a random example, Sibley gives eleven pointers whereas Paterson gives six. The latter makes no mention of tail shape, the extensive white undertail-coverts or the size of the rump patch, and does not describe the flight. In fact, few of the captions say anything about flight, potentially so useful in seabird identification. Only phalaropes and auks are shown on the water, when in calm conditions many of the species covered might be encountered sitting on the sea.

No range or status information is given, which the author points out is available elsewhere. This is true, but if you are going to have to gen up on likely species for your trip then you might as well do so for their identification as well, which brings us full circle. In any case, you really couldn't use this guide to identify many of the more subtle species covered, such as the Zino's/Fea's Petrels *Pterodroma madeira/feae*, skuas and the smaller shearwaters; the drawings and limited text simply do not give you enough information on what to look for. It might jog your memory for some of the more obvious birds, but for most pelagic birders I don't think that will be a good enough reason to take this guide to sea. The idea for the book is a good one but unfortunately the execution is rather disappointing.

John P. Martin



Barn Owl Conservation Handbook: a comprehensive guide for ecologists, surveyors, land managers and ornithologists

By The Barn Owl Trust

Pelagic Publishing, 2012

Pbk, 395pp; many colour and black-and-white photographs

ISBN 978-1-907807-14-5 Subbuteo code M21073

£39.99 **BB Bookshop price £35.99**

The Barn Owl Trust has an excellent reputation for providing high-quality advice about this species, and their website is full of leaflets and information notes covering a wide range of subjects. This book brings together all that advice and guidance in one place, providing an invaluable resource for anyone involved in Barn Owl *Tyto alba* conservation. The book covers everything from legal and planning aspects, habitat management, nestbox design and installation, through to measures to reduce mortality from threats such as rodenticide poisoning and major roads. The text is balanced and well organised with a handy summary of key points at the start of each chapter, and excellent use is made of photographs and drawings throughout. The level of detail included is impressive and it is clear that the authors have gone to some lengths to try to make the guide as comprehensive as possible. There is even a series of plates to help determine how long a Barn Owl corpse may have lain undisturbed at an indoor roost site, culminating at an impressive 17 years after death, all recorded for posterity by the same photographer. This information could be useful to planners in helping to determine whether or not a site has been recently occupied by Barn Owls.

While the book will appeal mainly to professionals and volunteers closely involved with this species, there is also much information that is relevant to birders more generally. Armed with the information in the book, anyone who has contact

with farmers or landowners can help to spread the word about Barn Owl-friendly farming. And the book covers situations that almost any birder could encounter, such as stumbling across a nestling Barn Owl out of its nest-site. The usual advice, including for the Tawny Owl *Strix aluco*, is to leave well alone but it does not apply in this case! The book also tackles a number of issues that will be of wider interest than just to Barn Owl devotees. To give one example: many of us put food out for garden birds every day but is it acceptable to provide food for wild Barn Owls in order to try to boost survival rates?

A handbook of 395 pages might seem rather a lot to devote to just one species, albeit one of our most popular and iconic birds. Wildlife on farmland has fared badly in recent decades and a whole range of once familiar species are struggling and in need of assistance. However, as the authors point out, focusing conservation efforts on popular, high-profile species, particularly those towards the top of the food chain, can encourage measures that will ultimately benefit a wide range of other wildlife. If a farm has plenty of old trees for Barn Owls to nest in, rough grassland full of small mammals to feed on, and if poisons are used carefully to avoid accidental poisoning, then it will be a good place for a wide range of wildlife. This volume is the definitive guide for those involved in Barn Owl conservation but will hopefully help to achieve a great deal more besides.

Ian Carter

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