

Reviews

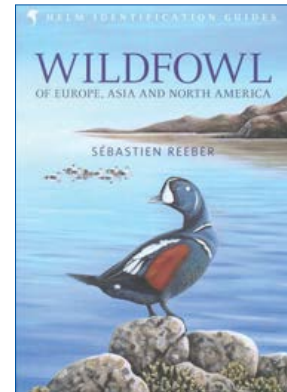
Wildfowl of Europe, Asia and North America

By Sébastien Reeber

Christopher Helm/Bloomsbury, 2015

Hbk, 656pp; 72 colour plates, 650 colour photos, distribution maps, black-and-white illustrations

ISBN 978-1-4729-1234-3, Wild Sounds price £31.99, quote BB091



This impressive volume covers the identification and ageing of 83 species of ducks, geese and swans that breed in North America, Europe and Asia. In essence it deals with all the species that occur regularly in the entire Holarctic region, including the probably extinct Crested Shelduck *Tadorna cristata*. Not included are a few breeding species from southern Asia such as Wandering Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna arcuata*, Sunda *Anas gibberifrons* and Andaman Teals *A. albogularis* and the possibly extinct Pink-headed Duck *Rhodonessa caryophyllacea*. These species, a small number of vagrants to the region and others that have occurred only as escapes from captivity were covered in Madge and Burn's *Wildfowl: an identification guide to the ducks, geese and swans of the world* (Helm, 1988). Compared with the earlier volume, the reduced geographical scope of the present guide allows for a much more detailed treatment of each species. This incorporates numerous new insights into identification and taxonomy and several recently elevated species are fully covered for the first time. The vexing subject of hybridisation is examined in far greater detail than previously.

An introduction covers general topics such as taxonomy and systematics, topography, ageing and sexing, but all with a particular emphasis on wildfowl. There are extended sections on hybridisation and on the rationale behind the terminology used to describe plumages and moult.

About one-third of the book is devoted to the presentation of 72 identification plates, with captions and distribution maps on the facing page. The illustrations are of a high standard and constitute a comprehensive catalogue of the appearance of each species in all plumages and include numerous variations. Furthermore, a large number of known hybrid combinations are also depicted, with a particular emphasis on those that represent significant identification pitfalls. For example, in total there are paintings of four males and one female Eurasian *A. penelope* × American

Wigeon *A. americana* hybrids plus two male backcrosses (one to each species), as well as

depictions of both male and female Eurasian × Chiloe Wigeon *A. sibilatrix* crosses and a further eight hybrid combinations involving Wigeons.

The remainder of the book examines each species in even greater detail, covering taxonomy (including contrasting views), general identification and ageing characters, detailed descriptions of each age category and plumage (including illustrations of feather patterns and shapes useful in ageing for some species or groups), moult strategy, geographical variation, biometrics, voice, hybridisation (especially in the wild), habitat preferences and lifestyle characteristics, range and population (including threat status) and status in captivity (covering prevalence, ease of maintenance and breeding, and even price – a key consideration in relation to knotty problems of provenance). At the end of each species account the most important references are listed, while a comprehensive list of all references runs to almost 1,400 entries. All in all this adds up to a very comprehensive examination of each species, which is further complemented by the inclusion of numerous high-quality colour photographs (all of birds in the wild) with captions that further clarify key identification and ageing characteristics.

Forms recently elevated to species status by at least some major taxonomic bodies are treated as such, including, for example, Eurasian *A. crecca* and Green-winged Teal *A. carolinensis*, Common *Melanitta nigra* and Black Scoter *M. americana* – in each case with details of the latest thinking on the separation of birds in less distinctive plumages. In this sense it is a major advance on some previous guides.

The English names used and taxonomy followed are relatively familiar and traditional, no novel taxonomic treatments are adopted and



alternative English names are indicated as appropriate. Less familiar, at least to many readers outside North America, will be the plumage and moult terminology used. This follows a recently modified version of the Humphrey and Parkes (H-P) system, a bold move by the author. The H-P system aims at a universal language for moult and plumages; it irons out terminological ambiguities, for example by distinguishing between a particular plumage and the age of the bird wearing it (they do not always coincide) and anachronisms such as the fact that many ducks wear so-called breeding plumage only during the non-breeding season. The chief benefit of the H-P system, though, is that it better identifies fundamental patterns that other terminologies either ignore or even conceal. This is an identification guide rather than a treatise on moult, of course, but given the complexities of plumage development and seasonal changes in many wildfowl, some of which remain unresolved, the H-P system seems, on balance, the most fitting

terminology to use. Wisely, though, the author often also incorporates some more familiar terms as signposts (though these are not actually equivalents of the H-P terms), so hopefully it will not be necessary to return constantly to the introduction for guidance until the new terminology starts to sink in. Even so, I imagine that the routine use of terms such as formative and definitive, basic and alternate will prove unpopular with more casual readers. Conversely, those with a deeper interest in the intricacies of moult and identification may find its use here an excellent introduction to the practical application and advantages of the H-P system.

All in all, this book represents by far the most thorough guide to the identification and ageing of Holarctic wildfowl. It should become the essential first reference for anyone with an interest in these birds.

Chris Kehoe

Swallow

By Angela Turner

Reaktion Books Ltd, 2015

Pbk, 208pp; many colour and black-and-white illustrations

ISBN 978-1-78023-491-5, Wild Sounds price £12.95

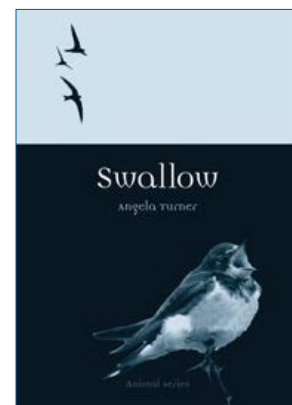
This small volume is a new addition to a rapidly expanding series, each book exploring the cultural and natural histories of a well-known group of animals, including, among the birds, *Albatross*, *Owl*, *Swan*, *Duck* and *Vulture*. That should be enough of a clue that the current book is not specifically about the Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* even if, as might be expected from this author, that species gets its fair share of attention. The House Martin *Delichon urbicum* and Purple Martin *Progne subis* also feature prominently given their close association with people (and their dwellings) in Europe and North America respectively.

There are some fascinating insights into the natural history of hirundines but the book focuses primarily on human relationships and interactions with these birds. I was reminded that the long-standing belief that swallows hibernated in the mud at the bottom of rivers and ponds was backed up by numerous apparent 'eyewitness' accounts that seemed to confirm the behaviour beyond any reasonable doubt. It was only through rigorous experiments that the truth was established, though

the ones involving forced immersion would no doubt fall foul of today's scientific ethics committees.

There are interesting sections describing the use of hirundines as sentinel species for pollution monitoring (including around Chernobyl), as indicators of the effects of climate change and as beneficial companions around our homes – hoovering up pesky flying insects and even warning when predators threaten domestic poultry through their noisy aerial mobbing. Personally, I was less keen on the sections on swallows in art, mythology and folklore, although others will no doubt find them interesting and entertaining. These aspects are what help to set this series apart from more traditional monographs, though they make up a relatively small proportion of the current book.

Ian Carter



A Natural History of Lighthouses

By John A. Love

Whittles Publishing, 2015

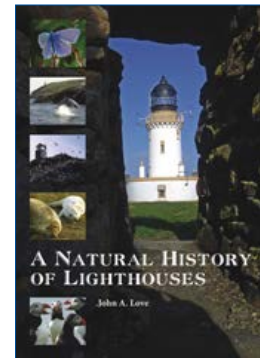
Hbk, 293pp; many colour photographs

ISBN 978-1-84995-154-8, Wild Sounds price £30.00

Exposed headlands and islands with lighthouses are among the top locations for seeing migrant landbirds and for seawatching, and the bright lamps formerly attracted large numbers of nocturnal passerines, often causing fatalities on a staggering scale. Light stations and their keepers played key roles in the early study of bird migration in Britain and Ireland. In response to questionnaires sent out by Harvie-Brown in Scotland, Cordeaux in England and Barrington in Ireland, the keepers provided the core data for a vast survey that ran throughout much of the 1880s (longer in Ireland).

John Love's *A Natural History of Lighthouses* gives a leisurely history of the development of lighthouses around (mainly) the British coasts, with excellent photographs, mostly by the author, of scores of lighthouses including some so remote that only the most dedicated enthusiast would ever get to see them. Sadly, only two of the hundreds of images show a view inside a lighthouse, and neither gives any impression of either the operation of a light mechanism or the cramped living and working conditions that the keepers had to endure. The Stevenson dynasty, responsible for more than a few of our lighthouses, is well documented and the author recounts many tales of human history, sometimes in the form of heroic drama.

The book, however, has a misleading title – just four chapters are devoted to natural history. Chapter 6 comprises excerpts from the diary of a keeper on the Bell Rock; chapter 11 reworks the



Harvie-Brown / Cordeaux migration study; chapter 12 talks about bird strikes and briefly summarises the

founding of some bird observatories. A few pages in chapter 10 skim over other animal life. Lighthouse sites take in bold geological exposures, stunted halophilic plant communities and varied marine environments as well as a range of creepy commensals, but these are not covered and the ornithology is mainly historical, with little of what we now know about migration or coastal ecology. Malcolm Williams's seawatching at Rattray gets mentioned, but neither his Steller's Eider *Polysticta stelleri* in November 1970 nor Britain's first Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*, which the keeper tried to sustain on Skerryvore in June 1985, are included. Nor is there any mention that returns continued to be collected from lighthouses well into the twentieth century (many now held in the library of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club).

This is a nicely produced book but careful editing might have removed some of the repetition, including a rather similar opening sentence to the first two chapters, got the height of the Flannans light sorted (pp. 4, 14) and maybe removed the 'N' word from page 63. An index and bibliography would also have been useful.

Alan Knox

Nests, Eggs and Incubation

Edited by D. C. Deeming and S. J. Reynolds; Oxford University Press, 2015; hbk, 296pp; numerous black-and-white and 15 colour illustrations

ISBN 978-0-19-871866-6, Wild Sounds price £59.99

This book brings together a team of leading authorities to provide a comprehensive overview of the field of avian reproduction. Starting with a new assessment of the evolution of avian reproductive biology in light of recent research, the

book goes on to cover four broad areas: the nest, the egg, incubation, and the study of avian reproduction. Applied chapters describe how biological knowledge can be applied to challenges such as urbanisation and climate change.

The Birdwatcher's Yearbook 2016

Edited by Neil Gartshore; Calluna Books, 2015; pbk, 328pp

ISBN 978-0-9933477-0-2, £19.50

Under new management, but the format of this 36th edition is comfortably familiar.

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