

Reviews

Handbook of Western Palearctic Birds: Passerines

By Hadoram Shirihai and Lars Svensson

Bloomsbury, 2018

HBK, 2 vols; more than 5,000 photographs and 400 maps

ISBN 978-0-7136-4571-2; £150.00

To the surprise of everyone except, perhaps, the authors and the publishers, Volumes I and II of the long-awaited *Handbook of Western Palearctic Birds* (*HWPB*), covering the passerines, was released over the summer. Many *BB* readers will remember the similarly long-awaited publication of the *Handbook of Bird Identification* (Beaman & Madge 1998). That book, which fulfilled a similar remit to the current publication, still stands as a monumental piece of work, a tribute to the knowledge and skill of the authors and artists, but by the time it was published large parts were dated or superseded, such that it was no longer the essential reference that it would have been, had it been ready a few years earlier. Does *HWPB* avoid the same fate? Is it timely, and is it essential?

The volumes represent a birder-orientated guide to the identification of passerines in a birder-friendly definition of the Western Palearctic. By birder-friendly, we mean that it ignores the biogeographical southern border of the WP as defined by the likes of Cees Roselaar, following political boundaries (to the possible exclusion of some African taxa), but including the whole of both the Arabian Peninsula and Iran, opening up a range of Yemeni and Asian goodies for the WP lister. What is new, and undoubtedly timely, is that the book is profusely illustrated entirely by photographs, depicting all species and nearly all subspecies in the wild. Digital photography means that there are now very few WP taxa for which excellent images do not exist, and the authors have presented an astonishing reference collection. This is the first thing that hits you when you open one of these books. Equally new and timely, though requiring you to actually read it, is the authors' consideration of subspecies. 'Everyone knows' that subspecies, even in

the well-studied WP avifauna, represent a mixed bag of taxa that might individually be more accurately treated as anything from 'good', if cryptic, species, to incipient species, geographical clines, marginally distinctive local populations, or biologically indefensible vanity projects and flights of fancy. In this single work, the morphological distinctiveness of every subspecies has been re-evaluated, with the result that many have been synonymised (i.e. found to be invalid), or retained but labelled as subtle or doubtful. We may not agree with all their decisions (see below), but we cannot question the authority and depth of knowledge that underlies the text of this book – it is a rework, not a rehash.

The books are sold as a two-volume set, although each volume is complete on its own. For example, the introduction, which bucks the trend of recent avifaunas in being mercifully concise, is included in full in both volumes, with different illustrative images. It describes the reasoning behind the scope, taxonomy, nomenclature and sequence of the books. Both volumes also include the same guide to moult and ageing in the field.

There are some minor errors in some captions, main text and range maps (as anyone who goes looking for breeding Parrot Crossbills *Loxia pytyopsittacus* in the Tay Valley of Scotland will find). With the bulk of the text written by Svensson and the photo captions led by Shirihai (and checked by a team of experts on ageing and sexing), there were perhaps bound to be some small discrepancies creeping in elsewhere although, by and large, the two authors seem to have worked well together to avoid this. The photo



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captions are, in a few cases, a little bold in their interpretation and often less conservative than the corresponding body text: see some of the sparrows, for example. Sticking with the sparrows, a few intraspecific inconsistencies have crept in, such as the statement in one Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* caption that 'As with all sparrows ageing impossible once late-summer moult completed.' As other sparrow species-accounts show, that's not true: the book offers ageing criteria for many of the other *Passer* species. There are other minor errors, understandable in a publication of this size, although there is a sense that the finished product could have been improved still further had the publishers dedicated some resources to a book-wide edit before publication. Indeed, some of the final species accounts were still being written as other parts of the book were set and ready for print. It feels as though, in the haste to get the title out, the publisher skimmed on some of the ornithologically focused editing that made Helm/Bloomsbury titles of yesteryear shine so brightly – which matches the feeling with several of Helm's latest offerings.

These few inconsistencies aside, the body texts and the photo captions complement each other well. Ageing and sexing details perhaps verge on being a little too 'in hand' for many field birders, but the text is nothing if not thorough and this is certainly a case where more information is better than less. There is genuinely new material in here, rather than just a regurgitation of current literature – and, knowing Lars Svensson's thoroughness, we can be sure that all of the ageing and sexing features mentioned will prove to be robust. Mistakes appear to be few and far between – due in no small part to the team of Swedish and Spanish 'checkers'. Again, an odd mistake has slipped through, such as the 'adult female' Naumann's Thrush *Turdus naumanni* on p. 383. That said, the original PDF proofs showed a much less saturated bird with a moult limit that's much harder to see, and the authors and checkers can be forgiven for not spotting the error. The change in saturation and colour tones between the PDF and the

printed material is stark. Indeed, some of the photos have had their colour balance perfectly adjusted but others appear to be sent to print 'as is'. Furthermore, some photographs appear to be very low resolution suggesting that a high-res version could not be found. By and large, however, the photographs are excellent and, coupled with the custom-written captions, they really show what they were chosen to show.

The text-based description of vocalisations has difficulty conveying what the birds actually sound like. The Sound Approach team, among others, have provided birders with a vocabulary for describing and understanding bird song and calls, and, notwithstanding the demands on space, some sonograms would have helped to communicate the information. Furthermore, when illustrating subtle plumage differences between subspecies, for example, single images of birds in the wild do not always convince – a few well-chosen images of a series of museum skins would sometimes do much more to illustrate these geographical changes.

In a publication of this size it's easy to be picky but, let's be clear, this is a magnificent publication and the few niggles above do not detract from its value. The effort that has gone into completing this publication is self-evident in the content. The species accounts form the bulk of the text, and the extent of coverage is impressive – Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor* (which includes the southern forms in this treatment) gets no fewer than 12 pages with 51 photos. Species texts include a short introduction to each species, saying basically what it is, with a range map. This is followed by sections summarising identification, vocalisations, similar species, ageing and sexing, biometrics, geographical variation, taxonomic notes and references. Birders who are familiar with the *Collins Bird Guide* or the *Identification Guide to European Passerines* will be very comfortable with the layout and feel of the current texts. Each species account is accompanied by multiple (typically 6–20) high-quality images of each age and sex class and, when appropriate, each subspecies. The images have informative captions, usually summarising key



identification criteria for birders who read these bits first. For some birds, side-by-side comparisons with confusion species are presented. Tucked away at the back, with more cursory text and fewer images, are sections of 'Vagrants to the Region' that have occurred on ten or fewer occasions. These could perhaps have been better named, since vagrants that have occurred more than ten times get the full treatment in the main text: Scarlet Tanager *Piranga olivacea* is in the main text but Summer Tanager *P. rubra* is relegated to the back of the same volume, for example.

The maps are one of the standout features of the book. Broken lines are used to denote subspecies boundaries and such a simple but effective thing saves having to open Google Maps to check where Lower Altai or the River Ob lie in relation to one subspecies distribution or another.

The taxonomy employed is quite conservative. The family sequence used is basically the now antiquated Voous order, and there is an underlying tension in the text between the authors' own experience and knowledge of the morphological and vocal characteristics of the birds and the recent outpourings of genetic evidence that underlie our understanding of their true relationships. Genetic evidence is fully cited and reviewed and included in the taxonomic treatment of the species accounts, but the authors make clear their intention to prioritise geographical variation in morphological characters when judging the validity of subspecies, and if forced to choose between genes and feathers, they have chosen feathers. This is fine, and will be welcomed by many birders. It leads to some potentially misleading arrangements, however. An example is the treatment of southern subspecies of Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*. The northern Turkish breeding population, *P. c. brevirostris*, and the Caucasian population, *P. c. caucasicus*, may well look and sound like normal Chiffchaffs but together they represent a genetically distinct clade, divergent from all other Chiffchaff taxa, and deserve recognition at some level. The authors' decision to set aside the genetic data and synonymise

brevirostris within nominate *collybita*, and *caucasicus* within northern and eastern European *P. c. abietinus*, does not represent their most likely true relationships and obscures some of the true biodiversity within the species.

BB readers in particular may notice the cull of subspecies occurring in Britain in this work such as its Dipper *Cinclus cinclus* 'hibernicus', Dunnock *Prunella modularis* 'hebridium', Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* 'zetlandicus', Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* 'gengleri?', Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* 'britannica', Linnet *Linaria cannabina* 'autochthona', Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* 'pileata' and Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella* 'calignosa' – all synonymised with more widespread subspecies. The authors may be doing us a favour – in most cases it has been suspected for some time that British and Irish subspecies of common European birds may well fail any critical review of their validity. However, the loss of some of the Wrens *Troglodytes troglodytes* might hurt rather more. 'St Kilda Wren' *T. t. hirtensis* survives, but 'Shetland' *T. t. zetlandicus*, 'Hebridean' *T. t. hebridensis* and 'Fair Isle Wrens' *T. t. fridariensis* are subsumed into 'Faeroes Wren' *T. t. borealis*. These decisions seem arbitrary and biologically counter-intuitive and ignore the genetic evidence, such as it is, that these subspecies exist and may well carry unique genetic variations that deserve recognition. The authors are correct that genetics does not (yet) provide all the answers to our understanding of avian systematics, but we contend that this is probably because we have not (yet) done enough genetics, and the days are gone when taxonomic rearrangements that may have important conservation or biogeographical consequences should be made without genetic input.

One downside to so much content is that it still has to be bound within two volumes. Consequently, layout sometimes feels a little cramped. With resources such as *Birds of North America* and *HBW* now available online, one has to wonder about the decision to publish this as a hefty, slightly cramped hard copy rather than a well-presented online version.



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So, is *HWPB* timely? Yes. Is it essential? Well, it contains a lot of quality reference information, and you would be crazy if you felt that you didn't want to know what these authors have to say about Western Palearctic birds. Its intention is not to replace any of the standard references such as Svensson's ringing guide, the *Collins Bird Guide* or *BWP*, but it

will certainly end up sitting side by side on the same shelf and included in that same 'default reference material' set. Like *BWP*, the fact that *HWPB* is already an abbreviation should tell you what an indispensable and well-thumbed reference it will be in the years to come.

Martin Collinson and Stephen Menzie

The Blue Tit

By Martyn Stenning

Poyser, 2018. Hbk, 320pp; colour photographs, maps, charts
ISBN 978-1-4729-3738-4; £49.99

This deceptively slim volume packs a mass of information about one of our most familiar birds into its pages. Martyn Stenning studied Blue Tits *Cyanistes caeruleus* and Pied Flycatchers *Ficedula hypoleuca* at the University of Sussex and a major part of this book describes the results from an intensive study of a Blue Tit population in East Sussex. He has 'mined' his data intensively and presents a comprehensive analysis of the factors surrounding survival and breeding success across age, sex and years. His data are supplemented by results from a wide range of researchers across the Western Palearctic, to give a remarkably broad overview of the biology of this bird.

One of the early chapters reviews variation and differentiation of the North African and Canary Islands populations of Blue Tits. Listers will be encouraged at his recommendations that many of these should be split: *C. teneriffae* (Tenerife and La Gomera, with subspecies *hedwigae* from Gran Canaria), *C. degener* (Fuerteventura and Lanzarote), *C. palmensis* (Palma), *C. ombriosus* (Hiero) as well as *C. ultramarinus* (North Africa) all take a bow. He also describes the many and varied subspecies of the last of these, along with those of *C. caeruleus*. I am not over-convinced at some of these but his reasoning certainly merits attention.

One thing that surprised me, in view of the detailed assessment of breeding biology and behaviour, was that the author has included little discussion of multi-paternity, with no reference to papers such as Gullberg *et al.* (1992), Krokene *et al.* (1998) and Vedder *et al.*

(2011). Similarly, there seems to be little or no mention of the effects of ultraviolet reflection of crown plumage. Sheldon *et al.* (1999), Delhey *et al.* (2006), Henderson *et al.* (2013) and others have shown how this can affect various aspects of breeding biology, including mate-choice and breeding success. I was disappointed not to see more acknowledgment of such research in a book purporting to be 'a definitive record of the biology and ecology' of this charismatic little bird.

Interestingly, and a sign of the times for publishing, this book is also available in ePDF format.

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