

# Reviews

## Steller's Sea Eagle

By Vladimir Masterov, Michael Romanov and Richard Sale

Snowfinch Publishing, 2018

Hbk, 384pp; colour photographs and line-drawings

ISBN 978-0-9571732-3-1; £39.99

One of the world's largest eagles, with the world's largest eagle beak, the spectacular Steller's Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus pelagicus* is on many birdwatchers' bucket list. For those yet to track it down, this book will further whet the appetite. It is a translation of a Russian volume by the first two authors, with an updated text and a new chapter added on flight dynamics by the third author. It is a timely publication. Although this huge eagle has fared relatively well until recently, largely due to the remoteness of its breeding range, this situation is now starting to change. The exploitation of oil reserves and associated developments are increasing and without appropriate mitigation measures the already small population and the habitats it uses will come under increasing pressure.

The authors have an academic background and are happy to deploy complex scientific formulae when presenting information about this bird. With only a 30-year-old maths A-level to work with, I found a few sections too much of a struggle to get through. Yet the book is very well organised and if you are not a fan of maths or modelling, it is easy to skip over the offending sections and onto the next, without losing much of the overall story. (And if you are a fan, you will no doubt enjoy them.) The majority of the book is accessible and well written, succeeding in its aim of making information about this species available to a broad audience.

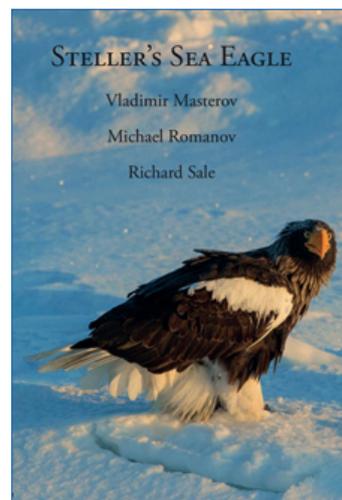
A particular highlight of this book is its use of colour figures and the inclusion of well-chosen, high-quality colour photographs throughout. The photographs give the reader a real feel for the bird, the way it behaves, the food it eats, the places it nests,

the threats it faces, and the remote landscapes where it makes its living. It might be easy to forget that Brown Bears

*Ursus arctos* are a significant nest predator if you simply read a few lines of text about it. But a series of photographs showing a battle between the two species, and the remains of nests that have been ripped apart, help to lodge that information firmly in the memory. The image showing a smooth metal sheet tied around the trunk of a nest tree perfectly illustrates a technique adopted by researchers to prevent further attacks. The book was funded by an energy company so perhaps that has facilitated the lavish production. Hopefully it also signals a willingness to try to look after this bird during the inevitable developments ahead. Time will tell...

Most European birders lucky enough to have seen this species will have done so in its well-known wintering areas in northern Japan. Some may have wondered what it gets up to when it migrates back north to its remote breeding areas. If so, this excellent book, based on a comprehensive overview of all the latest research, will be a worthwhile investment.

*Ian Carter*



## The Wren: a biography

By Stephen Moss

Square Peg, 2018

Hbk, 208pp; 50 assorted illustrations, incl. seven photographs

ISBN 978-1-910931-93-6; £12.99

I promise I am not in the pay of Stephen Moss, but once again I find myself saying that he has produced a remarkably good, beautifully written and absolutely fascinating little book. Every birder, whatever his interests, should read it, enjoy it and learn from it.

It is not a traditional monograph, but rather an affectionate account of the life and times of our most common bird, the Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*. Over 60 years ago, the true monograph, one of the most celebrated in the famous New Naturalist series, was written by Edward Armstrong: Stephen Moss stands unashamedly on the great man's shoulders in presenting the 'ornithology' of the bird, while blending in an impressive amount of what more has been learnt about it in the recent past. Not surprisingly for this author, the whole story is liberally mixed with folklore, history and literary references, which in my view adds greatly to its appeal.

The format is a 12-chapter, month-by-month examination of how Wrens live, and as I followed the tale countless personal memories popped up – how many times impertinent Wrens somehow got back past me as I drove the Heligoland traps on the Isle of May; the poor, hungry bird I caught by hand as it emerged from under a tuft in a snow-covered field; and one of a recently fledged brood that came out of a bush, landed on the front of my jacket and thoroughly explored me before moving on. I thought too how often, as I worked the coastal undergrowth for small autumn migrants, I cursed because the bird I had spotted turned out to be just another Wren... A thoroughly undeserved notion: the Wren, surely, has to be one of the best-loved of birds. While enjoying the section on island races, I recalled my huge pleasure when I finally saw my first St Kilda Wren *T. t.*

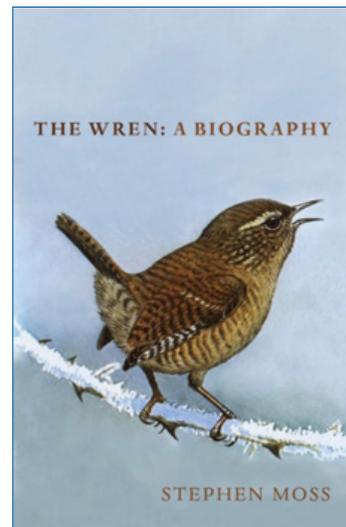
*hirtensis* – and a conversation I overheard in a hide, a few years later, when a birder remarked that he too had just seen

his first, only to be told by someone: 'Oh, but you can't count it, it's only a subspecies...' How sad, when such a super little bird is no more than a tick on a list.

Stephen has done Jenny Wren justice here not just in his text but in including a quite remarkable selection of illustrations, almost all of them artwork of some form or other. There is probably no collection of Wren pictures anywhere quite like this. There is a picture index, giving source details for each, but unfortunately the artist is not always mentioned. Richard Richardson, for instance, gets no credit for his illustration from the old 'Fitter' pocket guide to nests and eggs – which, also unfortunately, is badly misdated at 1904!

It is always disappointing when small errors and omissions mar an otherwise excellent book, so I am pleased to say I found hardly any others. I must point out, though, that being born in 1900, Edward Armstrong entered the world in the last year of the nineteenth century and not the first year of the twentieth. As I know I have remarked before, this is the sort of thing a good editor or proofreader should pick up.

*Mike Everett*



## Swiss Breeding Bird Atlas 2013–16: distribution and population trends of birds in Switzerland and Liechtenstein

[Available as French, German and Italian editions]

By Peter Knaus, Sylvian Antoniazza, Samuel Wechsler,  
Jérôme Guélat, Marc Kéry, Nicolas Strebél and Thomas Sattler  
Swiss Ornithological Institute [Schweizerische Vogelwarte], 2018  
Hbk, 648pp; 345 photographs, 1,074 atlas maps  
ISBN 978-3-85949-010-9; CHF 88.00 (c. £71)  
from [www.vogelwarte.ch](http://www.vogelwarte.ch)



Over four years, more than 2,000 volunteers mapped the bird populations of Switzerland and Liechtenstein and the culmination of their work is published in this comprehensive country atlas. Depending on the species, well-presented maps show density, area or point distributions along with change maps since 1993–96. In a country with such a large range in elevation (193–4,634 m), the atlas makes effective use of ‘altitude charts’ showing the proportion of the population and percentage population change in 100-m bands. The maps are large and perhaps as a consequence the written species texts are highly summarised. With data going back over 60 years, other maps show species distributions in 1950–59 and 1972–76.

The atlas concludes that although the number of species has remained constant between 1993–96 and 2013–16, many breeding species have declining populations and are also experiencing range loss. Themes

relevant to groups of species or habitats are interspersed as 46 ‘focus topics’ between the species accounts. The key trends are also picked up in the *State of Birds in 2018* recently published by the same organisation – an online English version of which should be available in early 2019.

The book is produced to a particularly high standard and is available in three languages. There are superb photographs atop each species account, so the English names in the headers should be largely redundant to most people. There are no English summaries, and some knowledge of one of the Swiss languages is essential. The species order follows *HBW*, starting with Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix*, but an index to English names is fortunately provided in addition to the Romansh and scientific names (as well as the language of the edition).

Ian Andrews

## Wildlife of the Arctic

By Richard Sale and Per Michelsen  
Princeton, 2018. Pbk, 304pp; many colour photographs, map  
ISBN 978-0-691-18054-0; £14.99

This pocket-sized photographic guide uses over 800 images to illustrate around 250 bird, 90 mammal, 30 plant and 10 butterfly species that might be encountered during tours to the arctic regions of Alaska, Canada, Greenland, Iceland, Scandinavia and Russia. Each species is briefly described in around 100 words of text. The book’s small size will be an asset to the lightweight Arctic tourist (when compared with Richard Sale’s much

larger *A Complete Guide to Arctic Wildlife*, Helm, 2006), but the text is compressed into such a small space that it is challenging to this reviewer’s eyes. That said, there is brief information on identification, behaviour and range for each species. A 28-page introduction explains the area covered and the challenges that this fragile region faces.

Keith Betton



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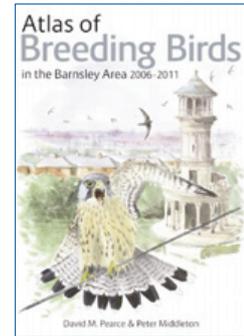
## Atlas of Breeding Birds in the Barnsley Area 2006–11

David M. Pearce and Peter Middleton

Barnsley Bird Study Group, 2018

Pbk, 344pp; colour maps and photographs. ISBN 978-1-5272-2868-9

£35.00, plus £5 p&p from Barnsley Bird Study Group



This local atlas has been a long time in the making but the end product fully justifies all the hard work behind the project. This is an attractive, well-produced atlas covering the Barnsley Bird Study Group area of 560 km<sup>2</sup>, the first bird atlas of the area. This is a breeding-season atlas, based on the less usual unit of the 1-km square.

For those less familiar with West and South Yorkshire, the Barnsley Bird Study Group's area includes the well-known birding site of Old Moor RSPB reserve, within the Dearne Valley. From this lower ground in the northeast to the higher ground in the southwest (rising to 546 m at Margery Hill) this is a diverse area altitudinally and includes a wide mix of habitats from pools and marshes, country estates and farmland to upland streams and moorland. These habitats and their importance for different bird species are explored in an excellent overview chapter in the introduction. Also in the introduction are chapters on the weather during the survey period and a review of the methodology. The reader is thus well equipped with an understanding of the area before the species accounts and maps.

Some local atlases offer only brief accounts and say little about the maps – not this one! Every species receives a full page of text, each describing, in turn, the local status and general ecology; the results of the atlas breeding surveys (including an estimate of the breeding population); an analysis of the results locally and in a national context; and a summary of recommendations for the conservation of the species locally. This last section includes suggestions for habitat management, potential constraints and overall threats. Population estimates are based on the results of this atlas survey, mainly the number of birds actually counted. Clearly a great deal of thought has gone into the writing and this

in-depth treatment is perhaps unique in recent atlases. This book really is a distillation of much of what is known about the birds of the area and for this alone it is to be highly commended.

On the right-hand side of each spread there are maps and a useful summary table with statistics such as the number and percentage of occupied squares (by breeding category) and the local population estimate. Also included are the UK conservation status (Red/Amber/Green), the 40-year breeding distribution change from *Bird Atlas 2007–11* and the national (GB) population estimate. Every species gets two maps, the first showing distribution at the 1-km square level using the standard three dot sizes, in green, for possible, probable and confirmed breeding. The second uses orange dots to show abundance, again in three categories: low, medium and high. Unfortunately, the colours used on the maps let this otherwise excellent publication down. The dots are overlaid onto background relief in various shades of orange (higher ground) and green (lower ground). This combination means that some distributions in low ground (green on green) and abundance dots in higher ground (orange on orange), particularly for scarcer species, become rather obscured, hiding some of the interesting detail. This is a shame because otherwise this is an absorbing read, packed with interesting and relevant facts and proposals.

The authors have worked extremely hard and deserve wide recognition. If this atlas had been available in time for the judging of the Best Local Bird Atlas award (*Brit. Birds* 111: 164–167), then, in my view, it would have been a serious contender.

*Mark Holling*



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## Where the Animals Go

By James Cheshire and Oliver Uberti

Penguin Books, 2018

Pbk, 174pp; colour illustrations and maps

ISBN 978-0-141-98222-9; £14.99

This book begins with what turns out to be an appropriate quote from Rudyard Kipling: ‘This, O my best beloved, is a story – a new and wonderful story – a story quite different from other stories.’ It introduces a rather unusual book about the tracking of animal movements, not just birds but other animals too. It is the product of a geographer and a skilled designer (who worked for National Geographic), but both have a fascination for wildlife. The book is arranged as a number of separate ‘stories’, each about a particular project on a particular species, written with the cooperation of the biologist who did the original tracking work. Some 15 stories deal with studies on mammals, 13 with birds, four with reptiles, two with insects, one with sharks and one with plankton. Each story tells of an interesting and often surprising finding, reminding us of the amazing navigational and other accomplishments that some animals are capable of. The book highlights the often immense geographical needs of some species, emphasising the inadequacy of even the largest national parks to fully protect large mammals, such as elephants, giraffes and wolves. As tracking has shown, these animals range so widely that they can spend large parts of their lives outside protected areas, where many meet their death.

In addition to presenting some of the most stunning stories from the animal-tracking revolution of recent years, this book can be viewed as a celebration

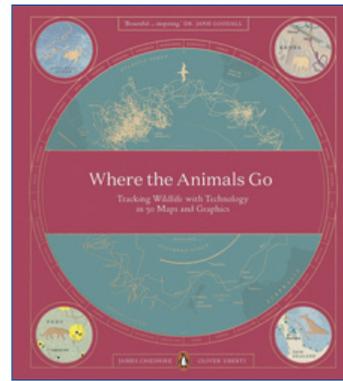
of modern biotechnology. It gives examples of studies that have used

acoustic tracking, Argos satellite tracking, GPS tracking, light loggers, radio tracking and various other sensors to follow individual animals as they travel around their daily ranges, cross continents and oceans, or move about below water or below ground.

Bird studies include migrating warblers dodging tornados, terns migrating between the Arctic and Antarctic, albatrosses circling the seas around Antarctica, geese crossing the Himalayas, Lesser Black-backed Gulls *Larus fuscus* on their foraging and migratory movements, Snowy Owls *Bubo scandiacus* hunting waterfowl from floating ice, White Storks *Ciconia ciconia* migrating between Europe and Africa, tits moving between different feeders in Wytham Woods, and several others.

Each story occupies some 2–12 pages, and the accompanying ‘map-drawings’ by Oliver Uberti are especially attractive and informative. This combination of engaging text and high-quality artwork makes this book a delight to read, or even just to dip into whenever you have a spare moment. It conveys a lot of information in a painless way.

Ian Newton



## A Bird Guide to the Fields of Experience: East Anglia and some rarities 1993–2001

By Frank Jarvis, Chatterpie, 2018

ISBN 978-0-9957976-1-1; £24.00

In this second volume (see *Brit. Birds* 110: 691–692 for a review of the first) we once again accompany Frank Jarvis through his beautifully written and illustrated diaries, but on this occasion mainly on his travels in East Anglia between 1993 and 2001. For a full review, see [www.britishbirds.co.uk/reviews](http://www.britishbirds.co.uk/reviews)



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