

Reviews

HANDBOOK OF THE BIRDS OF THE WORLD. VOL. 13. PENDULINE-TITS TO SHRIKES

Edited by Josep del Hoyo,
Andrew Elliott and David
Christie. Lynx Edicions, 2008.
880 pages; 60 colour plates;
many colour photographs and
638 distribution maps.
ISBN 978-84-96553-45-3.
Hardback, £150.00.

Well, here we are again. Volume 13 of the long-running *HBW* series, and another reviewer has to consult a thesaurus to find some more ways of saying 'very good'.

Potential purchasers of Vol. 13 will be pretty familiar with the formula by now. This volume covers 16 families of birds, including some charismatic, well-studied groups that pretty much guarantee the broad appeal of this instalment. Each family of birds is given an extended chapter, which starts with a narrative account covering aspects of systematics, general characteristics, ecology and habitat of the group, liberally scattered with specific examples from the individual species in the

family. The family accounts, as in previous volumes, are packed with top-level information, and the level of erudition is impressive. They are all well written and thought-provoking. Outstanding in this volume is the family-account text on the shrikes *Lanius*, which has many illustrative paragraphs drawn from an obviously intimate knowledge of the literature surrounding these well-studied birds, and is well worth reading. Few of the pages within these family accounts are without a photograph or two, and these are generally good quality – many of them are stunning. The species accounts vary in length but are often quite brief, and follow the standard formula of taxonomy, distribution, description, habitat, feeding, breeding, movements, status and conservation. These provide useful summaries without, of course, being all there is to say. As usual, there is a guest essay at the start of the volume, and this time it is a typically well-planned and authoritative chapter on migration by Ian Newton. It provides a nice précis of the state of our knowledge.

As might be expected, given the

track record of the series, this book is a pleasure to own. When I look at the accumulating bookshelf-bursting collection, it occurs to me that most of these books are still looking suspiciously new – am I actually taking care of them because they are so expensive, or am I not using them? Sure, I dip into them from time to time, but they are not scrawled over like my other 'working' handbooks and guides. If there is an issue, it is that sometimes the narrative style of the family accounts is a bit overwhelming, and it is not always easy to find the piece of information you want, or even know if it is going to be included. Without wanting to sound like a total geek, I am starting to prefer online or DVD sources to books, and *HBW* would benefit from being in a searchable electronic format, not least so that it would be possible to use it without having to winch a breeze-block volume off the shelf. Nevertheless, this is a valuable addition to an invaluable collection that has become a major standard reference work. The relentless march of this enormous project continues.

Martin Collinson

LARS JONSSON'S BIRDS: PAINTINGS FROM A NEAR HORIZON

By Lars Jonsson.
Christopher Helm, A&C Black,
London, 2009. 192 pages;
numerous colour paintings.
ISBN 978-1-4081-1014-0.
Hardback, £35.00.

Lars Jonsson surely needs no introduction to readers of *British Birds*. Some will recognise him as an illustrator of birds without equal, but surely most must now be aware of his true status as one of the greatest living artists at work today, in any field. His approach to working almost exclusively from life enables him to find something

new from every subject, no matter how many times he visits it.

The book begins with invited essays from Adam Duncan Harris, Kent Ullberg and Fredrik Sjöberg, who put their various slants on the importance of the work and explain the phenomenon that is Lars Jonsson. It is a sometimes difficult but nevertheless an illuminating read. Perhaps if you are impatient, like me, you may just skip those first 33 pages and get straight to the visuals.

The book itself grew from an exhibition catalogue for a show in Oldenberg, Germany, in 2008, in a similar way to one of his previous books, *Birds and Light* (2003). I say 'grew' because Jonsson has added other material to set the current work in the context of his working

life so far. He guides the reader through the book with a fascinating text outlining motives and method, or just the simple delights of the subject.

Starting with 'Early Works', Jonsson briefly outlines his beginnings for the newcomer and describes how his approach to art developed. This is followed by a section containing reprints of pages from his sketchbooks. I cannot resist poring over artists' sketchbooks, no matter who the artist is – they are so immediate and revealing. The next chapter deals with watercolours, which, having been executed on site (outside) for the most part, are a natural and flowing progression from the smaller sketchbook pages. As with the oil paintings in the next chapter,

they feature investigations into light and form, many from along a boulder-strewn foreshore, the recurring fascination in Jonsson's current work. These oil paintings in particular show continuity and are accompanied by little narrative.

The final section is entitled 'Ornithological Works', and features the Lars Jonsson work that is perhaps most familiar to British readers. Here, his approach to book plates is explained along with some well-known examples, and his appetite and ability to rise to

challenging areas of field identification are confirmed.

As I turned the page, I came upon his current area of identification interest: gulls (Laridae). I had brief hopes for a masterclass, but really this is not the place. Pages 172 and 173 hint at the treasure trove: 56 thumbnail reproductions of detailed field-sketch pages of individual gulls, the raw material, entitled 'The Puzzle of Gull Evolution' (puzzling it is; one is a Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*).

The final part of the book is a

biography, detailing significant moments in the life of Lars Jonsson. In Sweden he is a national hero; there are surely very few living artists from any discipline who have a museum dedicated to their work. This book is just what you'd want it to be, a first-class production, page after page of sketches, studies, words and paintings from an extraordinarily talented artist.

Alan Harris

THE BIRDS OF TURKEY

By Guy M. Kirwan, Kerem Boyla, Peter Castell, Barbaros Demirci, Metehan Özen, Hilary Welch and Tim Marlow.
Christopher Helm, A&C Black,
London, 2008. 512 pages;
32 colour plates;
distribution maps.
ISBN 978-1-4081-0475-0.
Hardback, £40.00.

Turkey is situated where Europe meets Asia, and its rich and diverse avifauna has for many years attracted the attentions of visiting birders searching for some of the most exciting birds to be found in the Western Palearctic. Countries such as Israel, Egypt and Armenia have all been the subject of a comprehensive national avifauna but, although the Ornithological Society of the Middle East (OSME) has published regular updates on Turkey's birds via the *Turkey Bird Report*, until now there has been no really thorough and comprehensive assessment of Turkey's birds.

This book has been a long time coming. I met Guy Kirwan during the course of my first trip to Turkey, in 1991, and the first seeds of this book were clearly in his mind back then. A year later some of the first texts had been drafted. Now eighteen years on and after many days in the field and museum, and at the computer, we see the fruits of his and his team's labours.

The introductory sections cover a variety of topics. Peter Castell

provides an overview of the breeding season and outlines some of the remaining challenges that could and should be taken up to fill in the gaps in our knowledge of the country's breeding birds. A section dealing with some reflections on modern ornithology in Turkey is co-authored by, amongst others, Richard Porter, and includes a number of evocative black-and-white photographs. Beginning in a period when most of the birding in Turkey was undertaken by visiting European birders, this takes us through the most significant developments in Turkish ornithology through to the present time when, encouragingly, a small but growing number of Turkish nationals are pursuing birding as a hobby and making significant discoveries themselves.

Hilary and Geoff Welch and Sancar Barış tackle the major gaps in our knowledge of Turkey's birds, pointing us in the direction of where future studies could be targeted, and demonstrating that there is still much to be learnt. The senior author plans to keep us posted with details of new discoveries, updates and corrections on his website (www.freewebs.com/guykirwan/turkeybookupdates.htm).

Turkey's eco-regions, their biodiversity and conservation are covered in depth, and 32 colour plates include some wonderful landscapes and some superb portraits of many Turkish specialties. In almost all instances these

photographs are sharp and richly coloured, although a couple (Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus* and the hills around Gaziantep) are a touch blurry in the review copy. Significantly, most images are contributed by Turkish nationals, something I could not have envisaged during my first travels in the country.

Of course the main bulk of the book is taken up with the species accounts. These cover all 463 species deemed by the authors to have been reliably recorded in Turkey. There are additional species for which claims exist for the country and these are treated in square brackets and justification for not admitting them to the Turkish list is provided. The cut-off date for publication is generally 2006, with reports and information from some more recent publications included where possible. So, recent discoveries, such as the Iraq Babbler *Turdoides altiostriis* found to have bred at Birecik in 2006, make it into the book.

Each species is treated under two or three subheadings: 'Subspecies and taxonomy', 'Status and distribution' and, for those species that breed in the country, 'Breeding'. The sections on subspecies and taxonomy are of particular interest, and for each species an attempt is made to determine which subspecies has (or have) occurred in the country. The accounts repeatedly demonstrate extensive personal field and museum work and, combined with

a comprehensive and thorough appraisal of the relevant literature, this is an authoritative review of the taxonomy of Turkey's birds.

For those species nesting in the country, the section on breeding provides details of the timing of the breeding cycle. These sections contain many individual observations (usually credited to a specific observer) that on their own might seem rather insignificant. However, these sections are a mine of useful information, and demonstrate the value of ensuring that those seemingly minor observations make it beyond the field notebook and get submitted to a suitable recording body such as OSME. When pulled together in a publication such as this, their value becomes all the more significant.

The species maps could perhaps have benefited from the use of colour, but that would have doubtless added significantly to the cost of the book. The use of a greyscale for the maps does give a clear impression of bird distributions and they are generally easy to interpret. These maps represent the most accurate and up-to-date distribution maps currently available for the country, and it is intended that they are maintained and updated with any future data that arises. An extensive bibliography running to over 30 pages is testament to the extent of the research undertaken for this publication.

In most books there are likely to be some minor errors, but I am unable to find anything significant

here. The overwhelming impression is of a comprehensive and meticulous job well done. This is an excellent publication that summarises in detail all that we currently know about Turkey's birds and it is obvious that it will provide a baseline for further work for many years. In his preface the principal author expresses his hope that this book might be seen to nestle on a par with the likes of *The Birds of Morocco* and *The Birds of Egypt*. I believe that he has succeeded. This book ought to be an essential purchase for anyone with an interest in the ornithology of Turkey and the Middle East.

Chris Bradshaw

**BIRDWATCHER: THE LIFE
OF ROGER TORY PETERSON**

By Elizabeth J. Rosenthal.
The Lyons Press, Guilford,
Connecticut, 2008.
438 pages; 14 pages of
photographs.
ISBN 978-1-59921-294-4.
Hardback, £19.99.

Roger Tory Peterson was possibly the most influential birder of the twentieth century. His *Field Guide to the Birds*, covering the eastern United States, first published in 1934 and still in print, was a quantum leap forward in field identification. The European version, prepared in partnership with Guy Mountfort and P. A. D. Hollom, and still referred to by some birders as *the* field guide, appeared in 1954 and is also still in print.

Obviously, Peterson features prominently in all the recent books on the social history of birdwatching, despite their British bias, but the *Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe* and the friendship with James Fisher tend to dominate. The story told by Eric Hosking tends to be most commonly repeated: a select bunch of British birders visiting Hilbre are

listening to Lord Alanbrooke recounting his exploits in World War II, when Peterson interrupts with the observation 'I guess these Oystercatchers [*Haematopus ostralegus*] eat most any mollusc.'

The Alanbrooke anecdote does not appear in this book, but it easily could have done, as Peterson's single-minded obsessiveness is a recurring theme. Without any apparent hint of irony, a whole section is dedicated to debunking the idea that Peterson was a monomaniac by explaining that he was equally enthusiastic about wild flowers and butterflies. At another stage, Peterson's close friendship with Sir Peter Scott is seen as surprising, given Sir Peter's wide breadth of interests. The friendship with James Fisher, though, was so close because they shared an obsession. Clem Fisher, James's daughter, recalls visits by Peterson: '...they'd come in and sit down and still talk. Have food, and still talk. And then leave, still talking.'

The best biographies are often gripping stories, even if you tend to know the ending, but this book is written in a rather dry, journalistic style, perhaps surprising for a biographer whose other subject was Elton John. The research involved in producing the book is

unquestioned – the list of personal interviews extends to almost four pages – but the frequent lengthy quotes, while underlying the accuracy, rather tend to break the flow, as three or four writing styles often appear on one page.

The book has already appeared in the USA and garnered glowing reviews from many people who knew the 'Great Man' himself, as Peterson was widely known in later life. At times, though, the book seems almost too reverential, and the author seems quite surprised at any hint of criticism. Despite this, a chapter on Peterson's paintings as art is rather dismissive of his talents.

Exactly how Peterson became such an influence seems unclear. Just how did the unconnected son of poor immigrants get to publish his first field guide at the age of just 25? Perhaps it is because the names he associated with in his early years were more influential than a Brit can appreciate. Or perhaps, in America, it is accepted that someone with talent and a good idea would naturally go on and achieve.

Overall, the book is an interesting insight on a man who was undoubtedly an enormous influence on the development of birdwatching and conservation in

many parts of the globe. If you have read the recent books on the history of birding in Britain, it is also interesting to get a transatlantic perspective on things (it was hard to read the section on Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus* and DDT without shouting 'What about Derek Goodwin?' – although he was eventually given due credit).

It would have been nice to see more of Peterson's artwork and photos. There is just a rather old-fashioned-looking 14-page insert of mainly black-and-white photos. Peterson's work is presumably widely published and well known in his native America, whereas many in the UK will have seen little more than his *Field Guide*

illustrations. If you've forgotten how good *they* are, dig out your copy and have another look. Then, as the reviewer will be doing, go and find a copy of Peterson and Fisher's *Wild America*, the original Big Year birding-buddy roadtrip.

Mike Pennington

**BIRD RINGING:
A CONCISE GUIDE**

By Dawn Balmer, Liz Coiffait,
Jacquie Clark and Rob
Robinson. BTO, Thetford,
2008. 76 pages; many colour
photographs and figures.
ISBN 978-1-9062-0445-4.
Paperback, £7.50 + p&p.

Launched to help celebrate 100 years of ringing in Britain, and dedicated to the late Chris Mead, this little book is an excellent introduction to the topic. Following a short introductory chapter, there are main chapters on

catching and ringing birds, understanding movements and migration, bird ringing as a tool for monitoring and conservation, getting involved and, finally, 'frequently asked questions and record breakers'.

Well illustrated and nicely produced, the book is crammed with facts and figures and is as authoritative as you would expect, given that the authors include some of the best-known ringers currently employed by the BTO. Essentially, it is an introductory guide, using all those facts and figures to explain how and why we ring birds. Nonetheless, I suspect that all

ringers will enjoy it too, and find plenty they didn't know or had at least forgotten. Most of all, I think that it should be applauded for showing the extent to which bird ringing is one of the most rewarding of 'extra dimensions' to add to 'general' birding skills. Compared with buying a scope, digital camera and pager, becoming a ringer is not easy, and the route to an A-permit demands serious effort and resources, not least of time – but it's well worth it and this guide will hopefully inspire some new recruits.

Roger Riddington

**WINGS AND RINGS:
A HISTORY OF BIRD
MIGRATION STUDIES
IN EUROPE**

By Richard Vaughan.
Isabelline Books, Penryn,
Cornwall, 2009. 228 pages;
21 black-and-white
photographs, 23 colour photos.
ISBN: 978-0-9552787-4-7.
Paperback, £19.95.

We are now so familiar with the use of bird ringing, radar and radio-tracking to study bird migration that it is easy to forget how it all began. This book describes the early history of bird migration studies in Europe told mainly through the lives of four of the early pioneers, who were active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These were Heinrich Gätke (1814–1897), Hans Christian Cornelius Mortensen (1856–1921), Johannes Thienemann (1863–1938) and William Eagle Clark (1863–1938). Born in

Brandenburg in northeastern Germany, Gätke spent his entire adult life as a skin collector and observer of bird migration on Helgoland in the eastern North Sea; Mortensen was a Danish schoolmaster who 'invented' bird ringing; Thienemann became the director of the first proper bird observatory established at Rossitten (now Rybachy) on the Courish Spit on the southern Baltic Sea coast; and Clark conducted early studies of bird migration at lighthouses around the British coasts, and discovered the ornithological importance of Fair Isle. One way or another, all these pioneers left a huge legacy through their actions and writings, and together they laid the foundations for the next century of research into bird migration. Both Helgoland and Rossitten were left devastated by the Second World War, and the book goes on to summarise the subsequent re-establishment of these sites as centres for migration studies, together with the

development of bird observatories and bird ringing in general. In their interpretation of what they saw, these early observers seem to have got many things right, as confirmed by later research, although it is clear that they were working in times when bird populations were generally much larger than they are now.

The author of this book is described on the cover as an academic historian with an interest in birds and photography. He has produced a book which is both well researched and beautifully written, giving pleasurable bedtime reading. The author's own text is enlivened with extended extracts from the writings of these various pioneers, and the people who visited them. Taken together, these accounts convey the spirit of the time, and the excitement of early discoveries. For example, they give vivid descriptions of the huge mortalities of birds that sometimes occurred at lighthouses, of the massive irruptions of Pallas's Sandgrouse

Syrhaptes paradoxus into western Europe in 1863 and 1888, and of the incredible rivers of migrating birds that streamed each autumn along the Courish Spit. As an aside, the book also provides hints on the culinary merits of various bird species no longer legal fare in western Europe, and how best to cook or pickle them. According to

the old Helgolanders, who seemed to have eaten almost every bird species that appeared on the island, the Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus* provided 'the finest dish a man could wish for', and Gätke himself describes how, on catching a fat Ring Ouzel *Turdus torquatus*, he found his thoughts straying, 'with by no means unpleasurable

feelings, from the throstle bush to the soup pot'. In summary, this book provides an enjoyable and evocative read about exciting, pioneering times long gone, and is nicely peppered with interesting anecdotes.

Ian Newton

**SAY GOODBYE
TO THE CUCKOO**

By Michael McCarthy.
John Murray, London, 2009.
243 pages; 12 vignettes.
ISBN 978-1-84854-063-7.
Hardback, £16.99.

As the 1960s became the 1970s, I enjoyed our migrant songbirds in both Britain and West Africa. Bar one partial depletion from a Sahel drought, they showed resilience. In his 1972 classic essay of their biannual movements, Reg Moreau gave us their full scale and amazing reliefs. Four decades on in Britain, repetitive statistical injury has almost inured me to the loss of some niche species. Yet every passing spring, I wince again at the

ever-lower tides of most incoming summer visitors.

It is this loss of migrant security and the diminuendo of the dawn chorus that form the main themes of Michael McCarthy's book. Will he succeed in prompting redoubled action to reverse them? I hope so. Certainly his masterly re-telling of the recent declines of about a dozen 'spring bringers' is what one would expect from an award-winning journalist. The birds are vividly evoked in verbatim accounts describing guided visits to archetypal breeding haunts. Entrancingly, however, McCarthy also reprises from three millennia the views of over 190 scribes who have witnessed the birds' presences and wondered at their mysteries. Woven into a rich ornithological tapestry,

his twelve chapters are models of scene description and reader enlightenment. I learnt not just more about the birds but also of their best students and other extraordinary people.

Buy this book, enjoy it, then pass it on to several Philistines and, at the eleventh hour, do whatever else you can to save the western rump of the once teeming Palearctic-African migration system. A contribution to the BTO's new international initiative on migrant ecology would be a start.

McCarthy and Reg Moreau's ghost expect us to remember that avian rights were established many millions of years before ours.

Ian Wallace

**GREAT BIRDS OF
BRITAIN & EUROPE**

By Jonathan Elphick and
David Tipling. Duncan Baird
Publishers, London, 2008.
256 pages; 215 colour
photographs.
ISBN 978-1-84483-686-4.
Hardback, £22.50.

Great Birds is a handsome, coffee-table book that showcases a fair proportion of Europe's birds (some 200 species). As such, it's also a showcase for some of Europe's finest bird photographs, many of which are truly stunning images.

In his introduction, Jonathan Elphick says that his selection of species for this book was based on the most 'remarkable' birds to be found in Europe. His '200 Star Species' (the book's subtitle) range

from the spectacular Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* to the distinctly unspectacular Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis* and include 13 ducks, 21 waders and 9 owls. Each species is allocated a page incorporating concise and informative text, a neat little range map and status summary – and a photo. The photographs take up less than half the page whereas, in most instances, they cry out for more space. Happily, the species accounts (in the most recent taxonomic order) are interspersed with double-page spreads of magnificent images – and the occasional species also receives this treatment, for example Red-breasted Goose *Branta ruficollis*, Common Crane *Grus grus* and Snowy Owl *Bubo scandiacus*.

Jonathan Elphick is an erudite author (he did much of the text research for Mark Cocker's *Birds*

Britannica (Chatto & Windus, 2005)) and there is much to be gleaned from his written accounts. Find out how Thekla Lark *Galerida theklae* was named, which Critically Endangered species reputedly guides pilgrims to Mecca and which mountain dweller has the highest copulation rate of any bird!

Chief photographer David Tipling rightly receives equal billing in *Great Birds* because it's the great photos that make this book. Most of them are taken by David himself and he has sourced the remainder from equally talented lensmen like Markus Varesvuo, Jari Peltomäki and Roger Tidman. Among my personal favourites are the Steller's Eiders *Polysticta stelleri* on a rippling sea, the Kittiwakes *Rissa tridactyla* nesting on a Scandinavian homestead and the battling Black Grouse *Tetrao tetrix* leaping in the air. All of these are by David

Tipling; the grouse photo is confined to a half-page slot when it deserved far more space. (Incidentally, locations and dates for the photos would have been a very useful addition to the photo credits page.) There are some rarely photographed species (Caucasian Snowcock *Tetraogallus caucasicus*,

Dupont's Lark *Chersophilus duponti*, Great Rosefinch *Carpodacus rubicilla*) in *Great Birds* and others that have been rarely photographed so well (Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*, Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*, European Roller *Coracias garrulus*). It is this collection of excellent

photographs, many of which have great artistic merit, together with the very affordable price tag, that make this book a worthwhile addition to your bookshelf – or coffee table.

Adrian Pitches

**FIELD GUIDE TO THE
BIRDS OF EASTERN AFRICA**

By Ber van Perlo.
Collins, London, 2009.
2nd edn. 301 pages.
ISBN 978-0-00-728511-2.
Paperback, £25.00.

In 1995, the first edition of this guide received mixed reviews. In many ways it was a step forward, providing a pocket-sized volume that illustrated 1,487 species – from not just Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, but also from Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti and Socotra. However, cramming up to 25 species on each relatively small page was never going to allow enough detail for this book to have a major impact, particularly when *Birds of Kenya and Northern Tanzania* by Dale Zimmerman *et al.* was due to arrive just a few months later. Where the Collins guide did add value was in illustrating a significant number of species that other books ignored – such as those found in Ethiopia and neighbouring countries. It was perhaps for that uniqueness that many people bought it.

So, after 14 years, Collins has now decided to reissue this guide, presenting the opportunity to update the text, maps and

illustrations and add in any new species that have occurred since the early 1990s. Unfortunately, Collins has chosen not to alter any of the 96 plates, even though a number of errors had been identified. I find it amazing that they have decided to recognise these errors only by referring to them in the text and not by correcting them on the plates! There are around 20 such notes in the updated text. Some are relatively minor errors, such as the wrong eye colour (although surely easy to correct?), but others are more significant. For me it is simply not acceptable to reissue a field guide with illustrations that are known to be wrong. The Grey Apalis *Apalis cinerea* text reads 'Upperparts all very dark brown, mantle slightly more grey (no buff-brown plumage parts as wrongly shown on plate)'; and there are plenty of such examples.

Taxonomy and nomenclature in the first edition followed early volumes of *The Birds of Africa* (itself sometimes at odds with modern thinking). With this new edition, a number of names have been adjusted to reflect recent changes, for example Herring Gull *Larus argentatus* was listed originally and this has now been changed to Heuglin's Gull [*L. heuglini*] but the text still describes *L. argentatus*. Furthermore, the

plate still depicts a gull with pink legs, another error that is mentioned in the text. In addition, this is still the only book I have that uses the common name 'sylvieta' for what most people call a crombec *Sylvietta*.

A number of species have been added to the East African list since the early 1990s, but these have not been included. Similarly, the discovery of Karamoja Apalis *Apalis karamojae* in the Masai Mara, Kenya, is not mentioned. There are other examples where new information on distribution has been ignored. The first edition overlooked Southern Blue Waxbill *Uraeginthus angolensis*, which breeds in Southern Tanzania. Now it is mentioned in the text but no illustration has been added.

For many people the value of the first edition was that it was the only modern field guide to include all the birds found in Ethiopia. Any time now *Birds of the Horn of Africa* will be published and that will become the book to take to Ethiopia. As a result, this Collins guide has lost its uniqueness and now, as heavier guides are appearing in softback, the advantage of its light weight has been reduced too.

Keith Betton

**FIELD GUIDE TO THE
BIRDS OF EAST ASIA**

By Mark Brazil. Christopher Helm, London, 2009.
528 pages; 236 colour plates, maps.
ISBN 978-0-7136-7040-0.
Paperback, £29.99.

The region covered by this excellent and much anticipated new field guide includes Japan, the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, plus eastern China and Russia east of c. 116°E, to the Bering Strait, including all outlying island groups south to the Tropic of Cancer. Perhaps the title should include the word 'North', as the Philippines and other Asian

islands to the south are, of course, excluded.

As the book deals with 1,006 species (19 of them extralimital but considered potential) and currently runs to 528 pages, it is perhaps not surprising that the font size is very small. In fact, the 26 introductory pages and the index have a slightly larger font size than the main

species texts, which face the 236 plates.

Acknowledgments and the author's preface precede the main Introduction, which includes the aims of the book, a map of the region covered, the geographical scope, taxonomy, nomenclature, bird identification, bird habitats, migration and vagrancy. This is followed by descriptions of the species accounts, the plates and the distribution maps, diagrams of avian topography and terminology, and then an excellent textual summary of all the families. Just 15 references are listed, but with a direction to an extensive online bibliography at (<http://sites.google.com/site/birdsofeastasia>).

As Mark Brazil states, every author has to have a cut-off date, and his was the end of 2006. Coping with the rapidly changing taxonomy and improvements to our ornithological knowledge of the region presents huge problems; the taxonomic shifts, splits and lumps, and alterations to the family, generic and species sequences and varying English names must be a complete nightmare when bringing together a major project such as this field guide. Without going into detail, I think that the author, his acknowledged helpers, the artists and the publishers have done a brilliant job.

So what of the meat? Having the species texts facing the plates is a huge user-friendly advantage in modern field guides. In this book the texts are really detailed, including size, weights, extralimital and East Asian range (abbreviation 'SD'), habitat and habits including altitude range (HH), succinct descriptions of all plumages (whether male, female, immature, juvenile, winter or summer) (ID), bare parts (BP) and vocalisations (Vo). Alternative names (AN) and taxonomic changes (TN) are also given, though these last two abbreviations are not mentioned in the introductory 'How to use this

book' section and some widely used alternative names are not included. Thus the texts are a veritable mine of information. For all species that regularly occur in the region a distribution map is inset within the text. Though these maps are very small, the use of a combination of five colours for summer (red), resident (green), migration (yellow), winter (blue) and scarce (pink), and also small directional coloured arrows to small islands, means that they are in general very useful. Somewhat confusingly, the pink for scarce overrides another colour, so reference to the text is needed to fully understand that designation.

This reviewer, probably like every other birder, tends to look at the illustrations in a new book before reading the text. Fourteen artists have contributed, with Dave Nurney supplying by far the bulk, and the other 13 covering, mainly, their specialist groups: Derek Olney on albatrosses, petrels and shearwaters, Alan Harris on raptors, Hans Larsson on gulls, Christopher Schmidt on terns, Martin Elliott on skuas, Brian Small on bush warblers and *Locustella* and *Acrocephalus* warblers, Ren Hathway on thrushes and Per Alström on pipits. The vast majority of the illustrations are unquestionably of an extremely high quality in colour, shape, detail, proportions and jizz. Indeed, the depictions of the extremely difficult *Cettia* and *Bradypterus* bush warblers and similarly difficult *Acrocephalus* warblers are the best in any field guide. I can find only a very few illustrations that are not so good. Some of the kingfishers on plates 123 and 124 and the bee-eaters on plate 125 seem a bit dull. The head of the Northern Raven *Corvus corax* on plate 141 is much too small, especially for such an intelligent species! Neither Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella certhiola* on plate 159 rings true, particularly shape-wise. The Snowy-browed Flycatchers *Ficedula*

hyperythra on plate 206 are a bit too dumpy, and the female's eye is actually c. 25% larger than the male's! On the male Hill Blue Flycatcher *Cyornis banyumas* and on the male Blue-throated Flycatcher *C. rubeculoides* the darker face mask is much blacker than it actually appears in the field.

Since the book covers the likes of huge albatrosses, eagles and cranes, and tiny warblers, sunbirds and flowerpeckers, there is inevitably considerable variation in the scale of illustrations from plate to plate. However, why show the larks on plate 149 at a different scale from the larks on plates 150 and 151? Surely it would have been better to enlarge the two *Melanocorypha* larks on plate 149 to the same scale as the larks on the next two plates, and decrease the size of the *Aegithalos* tits on plate 149, which are separated by several plates of hirundines from the other genera of tits. On plates 169, 170 and 181 the fact that the single species at the top or bottom of each plate is on a different scale from the other species on that plate is not such a problem. Surely images on plate 147 could have been shifted a little to accommodate Purple Martin *Progne subis* at the same scale as the various swallows? Likewise, the minivets *Pericrocotus* on plate 133 could have been moved slightly to allow the Tiger Shrike *Lanius tigrinus* to be at the same scale. In the earlier non-passerine plates, where scales vary to a much greater extent, the sort of juggling suggested above would be very difficult, but maybe a dividing line should appear on the plate to clarify the different scales.

Any birder venturing into the eastern Palearctic, or southeast Asia in the winter will need this book. Oh, how we could all do with a similarly high-quality field guide for the whole of China and, to a lesser extent, for Russia.

Nick Dymond

BIRDSCAPES: BIRDS IN OUR IMAGINATION AND EXPERIENCE

By Jeremy Mynott.

Princeton University Press,
Princeton and Oxford, 2009.
367 pages; eight colour plates
and 57 monochrome figures.
ISBN 978-0-691-13539-7.
Hardback, £17.95.

By the time I had read the first dozen or so pages of this book, two things became apparent: *Birdscapes* is a groundbreaking work and it is extremely well written. Recently, there has been a welcome trend for books on the wider aspects of bird-watching, including our responses to birds. Some of these have raised the bar of quality high but this one soars over it.

The author is the former Chief Executive of Cambridge University Press, with an academic background in Greek philosophy. Though his writing is invested with erudition, it is also blessed with such clarity, verve and leavenings of wit that make it at once informative, invigorating and a delight to read. Its friendly style made me feel as though I was having a leisurely conversation with a wise and very well-informed friend.

Birdscapes is as much about ourselves as watchers and thinkers as about the birds themselves. The analogy of its title with landscapes reflects Jeremy Mynott's interest in our responses to their environment, too. Each of the book's ten chapters begins with a brief but

intensely evocative account of one of the author's encounters with birds, from Shingle Street in Suffolk, Scilly, the Volga Delta and the Flannan Isles to New York's Central Park, Kakadu and Delphi. The Envoi neatly completes the journey by returning us to his home patch at Shingle Street. He weaves into this literal exploration of birds and place the mental journey he undertook as his thoughts evolved during the course of writing the book.

The text positively fizzles with ideas. The first two chapters outline some of the many questions that intrigue the author, and introduce through example the diverse ways in which one can think about birds, from 'top ten' singers to what constitutes charisma. These themes are then developed in the following text, which includes discussion of identification and field guides; illusion and self-deception; listing and the hunting instinct; image and imagination; a whole chapter on bird sounds; birds in a landscape; disturbance, disorientation, intervention and conservation; a fascinating exploration of names; and a final chapter on augury, signs, symbols and emblems that poses the question 'why birds?' and suggests why they are so 'good to think with'. As well as footnotes, there are 23 pages of endnotes. Four appendices contain delights in the form of notable lists (of the Sumerians, Jefferson and Clare); birds and bonnets (of species identified in New York in the 1880s by Frank Chapman from feathers

on ladies' hats); a couple of nightingale mysteries; and derivations of common names of many Australian birds.

The huge number of quotations are well chosen and remarkably wide-ranging. They include not only words from more expected sources such as Gilbert White, John Clare, Audubon, W. H. Hudson, Roger Tory Peterson, Ted Hughes and Mark Cocker, but also from Homer, Descartes, Dickens, Oscar Wilde, Freud, Conan Doyle and George Orwell. There is even a transcript of Monty Python's (in)famous Norwegian Blue Parrot sketch, complete with a footnote pointing out that although Norway can claim no endemic parrots, a fossil species is known from Denmark.

Like the text, the illustrations are extraordinarily varied, from plates in field guides, a music score and a sonogram to sketches of Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* in flight by Leonardo – and wartime photographs of nude reviews at London's famous Windmill Theatre!

This is one of the most thoughtful – and thought-provoking – books on birds that I have ever had the pleasure of reading. It is eminently dipable-into but is so much more than just another 'bedside book'. Moreover, it is not just a 'must-read' for the initiated, but also would make an inspiring gift to help persuade a non-birding partner or friend that they are missing out on a rich experience.

Jonathan Elphick

A NATURALIST'S EYE: TWENTY SOMERSET YEARS

By Philip Radford.

Somerset Archaeological & Natural History Society, Taunton, 2008.
116 pages; 50 colour photographs.
ISBN 978-0-902152-20-5.
Paperback, £14.99.

This book is a compilation of articles written (in 'country diary' style) for the newsletter of the Somerset Archaeological & Natural History Society between 1988 and

2007 by Philip Radford, a regular contributor to the Notes section of *British Birds*. The observations are arranged in chronological order (and are not indexed) and cover all

aspects of natural history, though particularly birds, dragonflies and fungi. The emphasis is on interesting or unusual aspects of behaviour. Philip is not only a gifted observer but also a talented wildlife photographer and the book is illustrated with many of his own photographs. This book will be of particular interest to readers who live in or visit the West Country.

Roger Riddington