

REVIEW.

A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe. By Roger Peterson, Guy Mountfort and P. A. D. Hollom. (Collins, London, 1954). 25s.

This book of some 350 pages really will go in the pocket, yet it contains over 1,200 pictures and about 400 distribution maps, naturally on a small scale but most carefully planned and executed. It does not, as the title suggests and the publishers explicitly claim, cover all the birds of Europe, but it includes some description of the hundred species which have been authentically recorded in Europe west of Russia fewer than twenty times and a fuller illustrated description, usually with a distribution map, of the 452 other species which are either regular or have occurred at least twenty times within the same vast area. In addition, 36 subspecies separable in the field are briefly described under the appropriate species, but subspecies not separable in the field are excluded for reasons which the authors quote from B. W. Tucker's review of the subject in *British Birds* (*antea*, vol. xlii, p. 200).

The Wetmore order is adopted, closely following the 1952 B.O.U. *Check-List* so far as it goes, but with some minor changes such as the placing of Wall-creeper between Treecreepers and Wren instead of between Nuthatch and Treecreeper. It is disappointing to find that the authors, in their efforts to avoid confusion, have gone so far as to follow the *Check-List's* bad example over so-called type species of genera by interposing for example Great Skua between Arctic and Pomarine, or Corn Bunting between Yellowhammer and the rest of the buntings—a practice which seems to us unjustifiable (cf. *antea*, vol. xlv, p. 1). Vernacular names are given in English (with N. American equivalents where they differ from British practice) and in Dutch, French, German and Swedish; foreign language editions are being issued with appropriate adaptations so that the work can claim to be truly international in scope. Incidentally we welcome the adoption in this work of all the changes from English names given in *The Handbook* which have become standard practice for *British Birds* since our list in vol. xlv, pp. 2-3, with the trifling exception that the authors print certain names like Wood Pigeon as two words instead of one.

What first strikes the eye is, of course, the series of coloured plates by Roger Tory Peterson and even those who had not already been persuaded by his American work will hardly dispute the publishers' claim that he is the world's foremost painter of birds. The fact that his birds are arranged mainly in similar attitudes with up to a couple of dozen individuals in different plumages illustrating up to a dozen or more species on one plate might be thought to make it quite impossible to avoid sacrificing either clarity of definition of the diagnostic features, or aesthetic treatment of the plate as a whole, or both. It is a measure of Roger Peterson's supreme artistry that these formidable technical limitations have been entirely mastered and that the illustrations will give as profound pleasure and satisfaction to the experienced field ornithologist looking for each characteristic of shape, colour and attitude as to the layman who just enjoys looking at bright pictures of birds. The acuteness of observation behind these illustrations, the skill with which the vital diagnostic points have been brought out, the standard of draughtmanship and handling of colour, and the judgment shown over the number of pictures to be provided for each species set a new standard. Having so often had to criticize production aspects it is a pleasure to pay tribute also to the first-rate job which has been done by the engravers of the colour and monochrome reproductions, Messrs. Gilchrist Bros. Ltd., Leeds, whose standard of accuracy and finish does something to restore one's flagging confidence in British craftsmanship. The publishers and printers have also done excellently and the volume is certainly exceptionally good value for its price by present-day standards. The only slight doubt which arises is whether the paper used for the text, and the binding, will prove strong enough to stand up to the heavy and prolonged wear which such a birdwatcher's bible, as this is bound to prove, must undergo. Its keener addicts, especially if they travel much, would be

well advised to fit it out with some kind of extra jacket, or waterproof pouch for carrying safely in the field.

The species summaries in the text come out at two or three to the page and although the condensation has been well and often admirably done the reader needs some concentration to absorb everything contained in this inevitably tabloid diet. Of the three standard subsections those on "Identification" and "Habitat" appear particularly satisfactory, but some of the notes on "Voice", admittedly the most difficult, do not quite hit the mark. For example, descriptions of the calls of the Treecreeper ("A thin, high-pitched 'tsee' or 'tsit'.") and the Short-toed Treecreeper ("A single high 'tee', with tit-like quality.") would hardly convey to the uninitiated the nature and range of the differences between the two species' calls, and particularly the greater loudness and dunnock-like or coal-tit-like full-bodied resonance of the Short-toed's most typical and frequently heard calls, which with rare exceptions lack the shrill and "needly" quality of *familiaris*. As voice is so particularly important in distinguishing these two it is disappointing to find so little guidance. Other voice descriptions, for instance of the Crested Tit, compare unfavourably with *The Popular Handbook*, but many are excellent.

An important feature of the text is the series of brief, well-chosen points of identification facing each plate, together with page references and symbols showing status in the British Isles of each species. There are many black-and-white plates comparing birds of various groups in flight, similarly annotated, and in the case of terns for example the head and bill colours in summer and winter are similarly treated in colour. The many distribution maps, although necessarily sketchy, are extremely helpful in showing both the breeding and winter ranges, and within their inherent limits are both accurate and up to date. They represent an important advance over any previous account of European bird distribution.

Finally, not the least reason for gratitude to those who have so well done what European field ornithologists have so long needed is that originally two distinct and overlapping works were in preparation. It cannot have been easy to merge the two projects into one, and that this was achieved reflects much credit on the authors who might so easily have turned out two rival works, each backed by less experience and carrying less authority and acceptance than this one. If I were compelled to-morrow to give up every volume on birds in my possession except one, this is the one I would keep.

E.M.N.