

Reviews

Ducks of Britain and Europe. By M. A. Ogilvie. T. & A. D. Poyser, Berkhamsted, 1975. 206 pages; 15 pages of colour illustrations; numerous line drawings and maps. £5.00.

For many ornithologists, and all wildfowlers, ducks have a special fascination. This very interesting book gives a high proportion of the known facts about the forty-two species or subspecies of ducks which have been recorded in Europe.

Separate chapters deal with general behaviour, identification, breeding, distribution and status, migration and conservation. The author has been a member of the research staff of the Wildfowl Trust for fifteen years and this experience enables him to write about ducks with authority. He also writes well, steering a path between the popular and the erudite, and every reader—except, possibly, another duck specialist—will find much to interest and inform.

The section on identification is the longest, taking up about one-third of the text, and is accompanied by colour plates by the author's wife, showing the male and female of each species in flight. The breeding and eclipse plumage of both sexes is described in detail and there are notes on the appearance of downy young and immature birds. The book does not set out to be a field guide, but more information is given than is compressed into the standard guides

and the author suggests it may be of assistance for checking or confirmation. Indeed it may, but it would have to be after the event as the book is too large to carry in the pocket.

The section on distribution and status includes maps showing the winter and summer distribution of each species in Europe and the text gives population figures taken from the international wildfowl counts and other sources. It is a pity that more information is not given about distribution within Britain.

A short chapter on conservation and exploitation discusses the threats to the breeding and wintering areas of ducks. It is stated that there was formerly a considerable amount of ill-feeling between shooters and conservationists in Britain: it is true that this misunderstanding is largely a matter of the past but it is hardly helpful for the author to stress the possible disturbance by birdwatchers and fail to mention the surely much greater disturbance of indiscriminate wildfowling.

The division of the book into chapters means that a great deal of page-turning is necessary if the reader requires all the information about one species; the identification and distribution sections, in particular, would be more useful if amalgamated. The saving in space might have been used for giving more information derived from ringing returns and on the arrival and departure dates of summer residents and winter visitors.

E. R. PARRINDER

Birds of Town and Suburb. By Eric Simms. Collins, London, 1975. 256 pages; 50 black-and-white photographs; 144 figures. £3.50.

Throughout an energetic and successful career, from schoolmaster to director of wildlife sound recording at the BBC and, more recently, as freelance TV producer and broadcaster, Eric Simms has studied the birds around him, at home and on his frequent travels. His detailed, long-term research into the birds of Dollis Hill (*the London suburb where he has lived for 25 years*), covering breeding and winter censuses, migration, roosting and other behaviour, forms the inspiration and the basis for this book. But only the basis, for the scope is much wider than the title might suggest. After discussing the rise of suburbia, his chapters deal with the nearer suburbs; the outer ring (including estates, factories and open spaces); the edge of the countryside; rivers, lakes and reservoirs; marshes, sewage farms and gravel pits; and then, following these habitat chapters (which go well beyond the suburbs to other areas where man-made developments have influenced birds), there are discussions of birds and the pursuit of sport (covering game-keeping as well as playing fields, golf courses and water sports), suburban roost and flylines, and, a lifelong interest of his, birds on the move.

He draws vividly on his own experience, from Rugby and central London, Tring, Hilbre, north Kent, the Cotswolds, the Somerset coast and elsewhere throughout. These personal observations bring life and richness to the book, but in addition he covers the literature in detail (local reports as well as the national journals) and gives much unpublished data from other observers. The critics of amateur ornithologists have often complained that the majority of bird-watchers live in towns and suburbs yet rarely study seriously the birds of their home areas. After reading this massive compilation, their case can hardly be sustained. Indeed the only possible complaint left to them is that the sheer mass of facts is almost overwhelming, making it hard to trace the general principles which underline the avian ecology of the built-up areas. This can hardly be blamed on the author, for we are still largely at the fact-gathering stage (and there are serious gaps in relevant data from other disciplines—

and all too often an ignorance by ornithologists of what information is available), while so complex is the subject that it probably needs professionals of diverse interests to begin work on a synthesis. Perhaps a wider approach is also desirable, for elsewhere, especially in central Europe, much relevant research is now being done on this subject, often beginning to tackle the more fundamental problems. Meanwhile, here are the basic facts for many areas in Britain set forth lucidly and well, and reflecting always the skill and enthusiasm which Eric Simms has brought to his birdwatching.

STANLEY CRAMP

A Guide to Bird-watching in Europe. Edited by James Ferguson-Lees, Quentin Hockcliffe and Ko Zweeres. Bodley Head, London, 1975. 335 pages; 22 maps; 24 drawings. £3.95.

Most of this maxipocket-sized volume consists of 25 essays on bird-life in every European country, or occasionally group of countries, west of the USSR border. The units and grouping are ornithological rather than political; thus the Channel Islands are treated separately but appended to France, Corsica goes in with Italy, Albania and Turkey-in-Europe with Greece, and the two Germanies are integrated in keeping with the major ornithological association which serves both countries. Resulting coverage is complete if somewhat variable, although seldom to the extent of unduly skimpy treatment.

Some of the unevenness stems from the multiplicity of authors, although the editors have been commendably successful in securing consistency of approach. This usually includes some account of the organisational and conservation situation, topography, climate and ecological subdivisions, as well as the avifaunal review, in which inevitably place-names and (English) bird-names predominate. Nineteen authors are responsible for the 25 essays, the discrepancy accounted for by all four Fennoscandian reviews being undertaken by Dr Curry-Lindahl, the Germanies and Austria by Dr Bruns, the Benelux trio by the last-named and Bulgaria as well as the United Kingdom by the first-named editor. It is perhaps a pity that, doubtless for good practical reasons, nearly half the contributors are non-natives or non-residents of the country concerned (witness the markedly superior scope and content of the essay on Sweden compared with those on its three nearest neighbours).

Each chapter-heading includes a drawing of a bird apparently chosen as a typical 'bonne bouche' of the country. The selection is occasionally a trifle odd (e.g. the Great Bustard for Poland), but the drawings, by H. J. Slijper, admirably convey the character of both bird and habitat. Edgar Holloway's sketch-maps are also excellent for orientation purposes, though in one or two instances a little more detail could have been accommodated with advantage.

The last 35 pages contain tables of status for 432 species in a slightly re-arranged panel of 31 countries or areas, each species being allocated to one of six 'common' and six 'scarce to doubtful' categories. This provides a quick and useful way of ascertaining whether a particular bird occurs, even if it may not be mentioned or is difficult to find in the relevant essay. In general, a handy 'aide mémoire' rather than practical guidebook would probably best describe this book, drawing attention, in countries one knows, to what one has missed or the authors have missed (often no doubt because of the need for compression); and, in other countries, providing an obviously reliable introduction and stimulus to look into the ways, means and costs of making a visit. HUGH ELLIOTT