

Reviews

Rare Birds in Britain and Ireland. By J. T. R. Sharrock and E. M. Sharrock. T. & A. D. Poyser, Berkhamsted, 1976. 336 pages; 221 vignettes; many maps and diagrams. £6.00.

This is a companion book to Dr J. T. R. Sharrock's *Scarce Migrant Birds in Britain and Ireland* (1974), but, whereas that book displayed and discussed at length the record patterns of some 24 species, the present work

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analyses more than 8,000 records of over 220 species. The authors have presented a very complete picture of the occurrence of rare birds in Britain and Ireland, particularly for the 15-year period 1958-72, which is dealt with in great detail, and provide ready information to answer questions of the 'When?', 'Where?' and 'How many?' variety.

The species dealt with are those considered by the *British Birds Rarities Committee*, with the addition of Pectoral Sandpiper and the exception of Long-tailed Skua. Category D species—those, such as Baikal Teal and Chestnut Bunting, which may have escaped from captivity—are included, but are relegated to an appendix. Each species account starts with a brief statement of breeding distribution, but regrettably there is no information on non-breeding range or even a mention of whether or not the species is normally migratory or sedentary. A summary of the main field-characters is given and also, in all but a few cases, a useful reference to important field identification papers. These potted field-characters are generally both accurate and helpful, and certainly more than adequate for a work of this nature. Each account is accompanied by a line-drawing by one of five artists: Robert Gillmor, P. J. Grant, R. A. Richardson, D. I. M. Wallace and Ian Willis. Many of these vignettes are excellent, being both an aid to identification and delightfully evocative, and a good many have the additional merit of portraying the bird in rather different attitudes from the usual stereotyped field guide poses.

The meat of each account consists of an analysis of the records of the species. Those before 1958 are summarised or listed, but the records for the 15 years 1958-72 are analysed in considerable detail and, in the case of extreme rarities, those up to 31st December 1975 are also listed. When there are three or more records, the basic treatment for those in the 15-year period is to display the patterns of occurrence by means of maps and diagrams. The records have generally been split into spring and autumn, taking the end of June as a break-point, and a typical species account includes three histograms and two maps. Usually, one histogram shows the 15-year total of records in each seven-day period, the other two the number of records in spring and in autumn for each of the 15 years, and the maps show the pattern of spring and autumn occurrences on a county basis using different sizes of dots to indicate the number of records per county. This approach clearly succeeds in visually conveying all the significant information about the pattern of records. I found one error—the very first species account omits from the county distribution map a particularly important record that is included in the appropriate histogram (White-billed Diver, Marazion, Cornwall, 10th-26th April 1967).

The records of all American waders and American landbirds that occurred in Britain and Ireland during the 15-year period are combined in two separate analyses. There is a list of species on the British and Irish list that have not been recorded since 1957 and also an excellent summary, dealing with short and long term trends.

The standard of presentation is good, but one or two minor features, such as the apparent necessity in the make-up of the book to include some species out of sequence, tend to mar the general effect and doubtless some

readers will jib at the inclusion of a few species, such as Slender-billed Curlew and Red-necked Stint, which are still under review, even though this is always stated.

In short, this is a book that will be of considerable interest to any bird-watcher for whom rarities hold either a fascination or merely a passing interest. Although some readers will be disappointed at the relative lack of discussion within the species accounts, the book is far more than simply a form-book for 'twitchers' and, above all, is something to dip into and enjoy. Any minor disappointments will be more than compensated for by such delights as the Lanceolated Warbler vignette and the splendidly apt quotation given as an epigraph.

R. J. JOHNS

The Web of Adaptation. By David W. Snow. Collins, London, 1976. xiii + 176 pages; several line-drawings. £4.50.

Bird books continue to proliferate, despite economic difficulties, but it is still rare to find one that is original and significant in content, yet fascinating to read and lucidly written. Dr David Snow's account of the studies he made, with his wife Barbara, of some fruit-eating birds of the American tropics is one of these rare exceptions. Fruits, which, unlike insects, have evolved to be eaten in order to spread their seeds, form an excellent basic diet, but they are available in quantity all the year round only in tropical rain forests, where birdwatching presents special challenges. These forests are dense, hard to penetrate and often gloomy, with the thinly scattered birds mostly hidden in tall trees or thick cover; there are many snakes, some of them highly poisonous (fortunately, active mainly at night), and far more biting insects (which seem to lack inactive periods). The fruit-eating birds that the Snows studied (including cotingas, manakins and the Oilbird) have access to a rich, easily obtainable food, leaving them much free time, so that the males have evolved elaborate courtship displays, of which many have rarely been observed and all were little understood previously, while the females alone undertake nesting duties. The first main task of this indefatigable team was to find the display grounds and then elucidate the precise nature of these curious and puzzling antics. The second was to discover the nests; these were often astonishingly difficult to find, for the first nest of any bellbird was not reported until 1954 and those of the other three species are still unknown. The third was to study, with the same patience and industry, the precise fruits taken by each species; over 100,000 seeds collected from the Oilbirds' cave were identified, resulting in the discovery of three species of trees new to Trinidad and one hitherto undescribed.

The details of this arduous and exciting fieldwork form the main part of the book. The results are summed up in an absorbing chapter describing the complex web of adaptations affecting feeding habits, social behaviour, nesting, and even plumage colours. It is impossible to summarise the intricacy of these adaptations, for Dr Snow's chapter is already a masterpiece of compression, free, like the rest of the book, from the daunting jargon of so many other professional ornithologists. He stresses that these forest

species face predatory pressures when nesting far higher than most land-birds in temperate regions, yet, when adult, seem to live much longer. This has an important bearing on the long-standing argument about the reasons for smaller clutches in the tropics and the even thornier problem of the chain of cause and effect between mortality rates and reproduction rates. He ends with a fine chapter on the threats to the tropical forests of the New World, with major destruction already in Colombia (once with 1,556 bird species, but now diminished to an unknown extent), Central America and eastern Brazil, and growing rapidly in Amazonia as roads are built and farming encouraged; unless urgent measures are taken, we may well lose many of these fascinating species before they are even fully appreciated, still less studied in detail.

At first sight, this book may seem to be of rather limited interest for the British birdwatcher. David Snow, however, makes two points which are of the utmost relevance to anyone who wishes to study the lives of birds anywhere—the value of sitting still and watching carefully rather than actively searching, and the importance of noting and investigating the fine details, for, until these are known, the complex adaptations in any species can never be understood. Indeed, the whole of this delightful book can serve as a guide and inspiration to all who wish to go beyond simply identifying birds—and, as he remarks, we still do not thoroughly understand the social organisation of even such a common species as the Dunnock. Above all, perhaps, the book is exciting, absorbing and a pleasure to read.

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Also received

- Avian Psychology*. Edited by P. D. Sturkie. Springer-Verlag, New York and Berlin, 1976. 3rd edition. \$24.00.
- Behaviour and Ecology of the American Kestrel (Falco sparverius) in the Sierra Nevada of California*. By Thomas G. Balgooyen. University of California Press, 1976. \$6.50.
- Birds of the Countryside*. By John Taverton. Lutterworth Press, Guildford and London, 1976. 35p.
- Bird Diseases*. By L. Arnall and I. F. Keymer. Baillière Tindall, London, 1975. No price given.
- Birds of Prey*. By Philip Brown. White Line Publishers List, London, 1976. 2nd edition. £3.95.
- Birds of Siberia*. By Henry Seeböhm. Alan Sutton, Dursley, 1976. Reprint. £8.00.
- Field and Moor*. By John Burton. Kingsmead Press, Bath, 1976. £2.50.
- Golden Days*. By the Zoological Society of London. Duckworth, London, 1976. £4.95.
- Lindude Ränne*. By Eerik Kumari. Valgus, Tallinn, 1975. Rbl. 1.73.
- Looking At Birds*. Work-cards. Macmillan, London, 1976. £3.50.
- My Home is a Zoo*. By Charles Trevisick. Stanley Paul, London, 1976. £3.95.
- Owned by an Eagle*. By Gerald Summer. Collins, London, 1976. £3.95.
- Population Ecology of Mallard*, vol. V. By D. R. Anderson. US Department of Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Resource Publication 125, Washington, 1975. No price given.
- Vogelwelt Schleswig-Holsteins*, vol. I. By Rolf K. Berndt and Detler Drenckhahn. Ornithologische Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Schleswig-Holstein und Hamburg E.V., Hamburg, 1974. DM23.80.
- Wild and Tame*. By Erik Sietholt. Duckworth, London, 1975. £3.95.
- The World Atlas of Birds*. Mitchell Beazley Publishers Ltd, London, 1976. Paperback. £3.95.
- The World of a Stream*. By Heather Angel. Faber and Faber, London, 1976. £2.95.