

Reviews

Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan. Compact edition. By Sálím Ali and S. Dillon Ripley. Oxford University Press, New Delhi & Oxford, 1983. 737 pages + 113 colour plates; numerous maps and line-drawings. £75.00.

Ever since the publication of the first of the ten volumes of the *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan*, in 1968, this has been the much-praised standard work on the birds of the subcontinent. The last of the ten volumes was published in 1974, only six years after the first. This review need not repeat the detailed critical analyses given by Sir Hugh Elliott and Stanley Cramp in their reviews of the individual volumes as they were published (*Brit. Birds* 62: 544-546; 66: 170-171; 69: 223). These ten volumes have been used so much over the past ten years or so that it is unnecessary to do other than remind readers of the excellent layout, generally good cross-referencing and usefulness of these volumes. The main problem for the ornithologist visiting these areas of the world has been the impracticability of carrying ten large volumes on air flights and, especially, on field trips. That problem is now solved. This new single volume combines the text of all of the previous ten at quarter size, and the plates of all of the previous ten at full size. So, instead of carrying ten huge volumes, one can now carry just one (it weighs just over 2½ kg). Anyone interested in the birds of this area, or who is likely to visit India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan or Sri Lanka, will have good reason to thank the Bombay Natural History Society and Oxford University Press for coming up with this easy-to-handle compact edition.

J. T. R. SHARROCK

The Birds of the Malay Peninsula, Singapore and Penang. By A. G. Glenister. Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur & Oxford, 1983. xiv + 291 pages; 8 colour plates; 8 black-and-white plates; many line-drawings. Paperback £10.95.

This is an unmodified reprint of the first paperback edition (1971) of a book which originally appeared in 1951. The book has an unusual plan: following brief introductory chapters, the main body of the text is divided into two parts. Part I briefly summarises key plumage features, while Part II gives a fuller species description, together with habitat and status information. Totals of 64 species are illustrated in colour and 86 in monochrome plates, photographs or line-drawings. The text describes all species of birds known to have occurred in the Malay Peninsula up to 1971. Those from southern Thailand, considered a part of the Malaysian faunal subregion, are covered in a short addendum.

The text places much emphasis on identification by colour. Plumage descriptions and bare-part colours are needlessly duplicated in the curious two-part arrangement of the text, while far too little emphasis is given to birds' shapes and habits. This is, perhaps, understandable as, when this book first appeared, the field-guide format had yet to become standard outside the USA. The author was, for his time, highly successful in producing an attractive, informative and compact book, but it is a format which is sadly inadequate for today. Some introductory sections ('Malayan Birds as a Hobby'; 'Bird Life of Towns and Gardens'; 'The Bird Life of the Hill Stations'; and 'For the Sportsman') reveal the book's original intended appeal to the colonial administrators of the day. Today's birdwatcher is more likely to be found stalking resolutely along trails in search of pheasants, pittas, babblers and various other 'arch-skulkers' of the deep forest, especially lowland rain forest. Although such species are described in the text, they are under-represented in the illustrations, and only two of Malaysia's 50 species of babbler are illustrated in colour (and another three depicted in line-drawings).

Some positive attributes of the book include a compact table giving easily recognisable mnemonics for the calls of some commoner birds. Appendix B lists all bird species known to occur in Sumatra, Java and Borneo. There is a photograph of a caged male Crested Argus Pheasant *Rheinartia ocellata*, a species which may no longer be held in captivity, and which only a handful of ornithologists have ever seen in the wild. Although this book does have colour illustrations of two species not depicted in King, Woodcock & Dickinson (1975, *Field Guide to the Birds of South-East Asia*), most other species are illustrated and described far more accurately in the latter.

It is unfortunate that no effort has been made to update this edition. Appendix D, added in 1971, gives the English and scientific names then used by the Malayan Nature Society and is included in this reprint even though some of them are no longer in current usage (the MNS and most other birdwatchers now follow the names of King *et al.*). Thus, the Dusky Thrush in the main body of the text becomes Grey-headed Thrush in the appendix, but the species actually referred to is Eye-browed Thrush *Turdus obscurus*. Status information for many species is no longer current, sadly because so much lowland forest has fallen to the axe in the intervening years. Gurney's Pitta *Pitta gurneyi*, for example, is listed as '... fairly common locally in the lowlands of peninsular Thailand' even though it has apparently not been seen in the wild by any living ornithologist and is now listed in the ICBP Bird Red Data Book.

Of course, there are limits to the number of footnotes and appendices that can be added to a book before it loses any semblance of the original. Nonetheless, if any book deserved extensive revision before release, then this surely is it. Possibly the publishers were hoping to reap maximum profit from sales to an expanding or undiscerning birdbook-buying public in return for minimum outlay. Although a few Asian bird enthusiasts may purchase this book for historical interest, or for the sake of the completeness of their libraries, it will have limited utility given the availability of the King *et al.* field guide. Peninsular Malaysia, however, is poorly served even by this work, as many of the Sunda endemics which occur there are not illustrated. It is surely time that a fully illustrated field guide to Malaysian birds came into being.

The review copy supplied had a block of 16 pages missing.

P. D. ROUND

The Birds of the Wetlands. By James Hancock. Croom Helm, London, 1984. 152 pages; 113 colour plates. £13.95.

This book covers nine major wetland areas of the world, describing their histories, habitats, birds and conservation problems. The brief accounts, which provide a stimulating introduction to each place, and the useful hints on travel gave me a severe attack of itchy feet. It is sad that most of these sites are threatened by drought, development, pollution, or clogging vegetation. The largely inaccessible reedbeds of the Zhalong Reserve in China are hopefully free from such problems, and the Shinhama Reserve in Japan has apparently been saved in the nick of time. The 19 pages devoted to area checklists of birds could perhaps have been more usefully filled; the one for Bharatpur seems to have been copied uncritically from the published list available previously (but apparently not currently) at the sanctuary itself. The author admits that his nomenclature has not been standardised, but the listing of the Darter *Anhinga melanogaster* under five different English names (and a curious mix of scientific names) serves only to confuse.

The most striking feature of the book, which alone makes it worth buying, is the colour photographs. It is not surprising, given the author's interests, that nearly half of the 102 bird photographs are of herons. Even so, the inclusion of 19 depicting white egrets is surely an excess of these, albeit attractive, birds.

The photographs are generally of a high standard, and so it is a pity that some, including a mislabelled Green Sandpiper, are marred by being 'bent' across two pages. A few are rather out of focus and could have been replaced by more shots of the habitat.

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