

Reviews

Neotropical Ornithology. Edited by P. A. Buckley, Mercedes S. Foster, Eugene S. Morton, Robert S. Ridgely and Francine C. Buckley. Ornithological Monographs No. 36. American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, 1985, 1,044 pages; eight colour plates; eight black-and-white plates. \$70.00.

Though relatively few European birdwatchers will be able or lucky enough to enjoy the wealth of South American birdlife in person to any great degree, the fact remains that Neotropical birds are spectacular not just in their numbers and their plumages, but also in fundamental ways in their biology and ecology. This book contains 63 invited papers, from appropriate authors (ranging from world figures to post-graduate students), divided into sections on taxonomy, zoogeography, systematics, evolution, population ecology, behavioural ecology, biology and conservation, each several papers strong. Fascinating facts, intriguing theories and examples of sound biological science are plentiful. Though to some readers the title 'Is *Diglossa* (?Thraupinae) monophyletic?' might seem a bit starchy, others would find 'Going to extremes: why do Sanderlings migrate to the tropics?' and 'Migratory shorebirds: resource depletion in the tropics' absorbing to say the least. Such variety is typical of the book as a whole; thus, to any ornithologist with a serious interest in birds world-wide, this becomes a most valuable compendium, opening many windows into the lives of tropical birds.

JIM FLEGG

Seabirds: an identification guide. By Peter Harrison. Revised edition. Croom Helm, London, 1985. 448 pages; 88 colour plates; 312 maps; many line-drawings. £19.95.

Many subscribers will already be familiar with *Seabirds*, voted the 'British Birds' Best Bird Book of the Year 1983. This revised edition contains 84 of the original 88 plates unchanged, and four new plates; of these latter, two have been expanded to include two recently discovered species, and the other new plates (28 & 29) are marked improvements. In view of this, it seems a pity that a few more of the less successful original plates were not also repainted.

Approximately 1-2% of the text has been updated, and many of the distribution maps have been revised. The typographical errors noted in the review of the first edition (*Brit. Birds* 76: 371-372) have been corrected. As mentioned in that review, there appears to have been a conflict of priorities in the treatment of certain species groups: plates 54 & 55 (skuas) for example, are so overcrowded as to be confusing, yet there are no illustrations of swimming or standing birds, and a full five plates are devoted to grebes.

In common with many such works, the book is not without its minor flaws, but for its comprehensiveness and generally superb standard Peter Harrison's *Seabirds* remains unequalled.

Owners of a copy of the first edition may find it difficult to justify spending almost £20 on this edition, but no serious birder can afford to be without a copy of this indispensable guide.

PAUL ARCHER

Birds of the Sheffield Area including the North-east Peak District. Edited by Jon Hornbuckle & David Herringshaw. Sheffield Bird Study Group & Sheffield City Libraries, Sheffield, 1985. 312 pages; 120 line drawings; over 100 maps. Hardback £11.95; paperback £8.95.

The recording area of the Sheffield Bird Study Group (SBSG) is only 1,200 km² in extent, but, lying at the boundary between upland and lowland Britain, it encompasses a wide variety of habitats, from the high plateaux of the southern Pennines (and the site of the famous Marmora's Warbler *Sylvia sarda*) to the flood plains of the rivers Rother and Don. The SBSG was formed as recently as 1972, but has rapidly acquired a reputation for excellent local studies: it pioneered the Waterways Bird Survey in 1973, while its occasional journal, *The Magpie*, has been very well received (*Brit. Birds* 74: 402). This reputation will be more firmly established by the publication of *Birds of the Sheffield Area*.

The genesis of the book was a tetrad breeding-bird survey conducted during 1975-80; it was decided that, rather than being published in isolation, the results should be incorporated into a more comprehensive review of the regional avifauna. The review covers the period 1960 to 1984, with a few records from early 1985 where they are of special relevance.

An excellent introductory chapter elucidates the character of the region, with geology, physiography, climate and land-use displayed in great detail on the tetrad grids. Brief chapters are devoted to the history of ornithology in the area, visible migration studies, and changes in the avifauna during the period of the review (gains include both Goosander *Mergus merganser* and Red-breasted Merganser *M. serrator*, but Merlin *Falco columbarius*, Black Grouse *Tetrao tetrix* and Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus* have seriously declined).

The Classified List deals with 248 species in 230 pages (while 12 species not recorded since before 1960, and 20 species regarded as escapes are noted in appendices). This total, however, includes several species not yet formally accepted by the relevant records committee, and one—Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* in 1963—which was rejected by the Rarities Committee. Good use is made of Wildfowl Counts, CBC data and ringing returns. For most breeding species, a tetrad map is included and (following the lead of *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland*) a useful transparent overlay is provided, which enables a better interpretation of distributions in relation to environmental factors. Where the volume of data warrants, histograms are used to display the monthly distributions of scarcer visitors and migrants (though in one or two instances—for example, Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*—the figures in the diagrams appear to be at variance with statements in the text).

The standard of production and lay-out is generally high, though there is the seemingly inevitable handful of typographical errors, mainly in the scientific names of species. Unusually in a book of this kind, there are no photographs. A map of principal localities is included, however, and an excellent set of line-drawings (several full-page) depicts over 100 species, but it is a pity that something of the atmosphere of the region could not have been evoked by the inclusion of a few well-chosen photographs.

In recent years, new standards of excellence have been set by a number of regional avifaunas and this work unquestionably joins that select band. With only 230 members, the SBSG is to be congratulated upon producing such a worthwhile volume.

A. R. DEAN

Handbuch der Vögel der Sowjetunion. Vol. 1. Erforschungsgeschichte, Gaviiformes, Podicipediformes, Procellariiformes. Edited by V. D. Il'ičev and V. E. Flint. A. Ziemsen Verlag, Wittenberg Lutherstadt, 1985. 350 pages, 8 colour plates, 67 figures. DM 78.00.

The first of ten proposed volumes on the birds of the Soviet Union was published, in Russian, in 1982. This welcome translation (updated) into German will admit of a far wider readership. Since Dementiev & Gladkov's monumental and pioneering work appeared over 30 years ago, ornithology has come a long way. Similarities between that earlier treatise and the present work are few; this new handbook is right up to date.

The 200 pages of introductory matter fired my imagination. The first of three chapters is a potted history of ornithological research in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union: five main regions (European Russia, the Urals and West Siberia, Kazakhstan and Central Asia, Central and East Siberia, and the Far East) are further divided into 36 sub-regions, for each of which we learn who has done what—and when—from Pallas (1768) onwards. Compulsive reading! Then follows an analysis of the current state of research, identifying the gaps (e.g. in the Central Asian plateaux); and finally a chronological list of the most important publications on USSR avifauna, from 1832 to 1984.

The divers, grebes and tubenoses. 28 species in all, are covered in 130 pages (from 14 for Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* to just over one page for Bonin Petrel *Pterodroma hypoleuca*). The texts, with much the same subject headings as *BWP* (though some sections are combined), give invaluable data on distribution and movements; they are informative on 'lesser-known' species such as Streaked Shearwater *Calonectris leucomelas* and Swinhoe's Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma monorhis*, though for the 17 species found also in the West Palearctic more thorough treatment is available in *BWP* and Bauer & Glutz, both frequently acknowledged as reference sources. I was slightly surprised to read that the Pacific Diver *Gavia pacifica*, rightly treated as separate from *G. arctica* (the two do not interbreed in the overlap zone), is

indistinguishable in non-breeding plumages from Black-throated Diver; surely *pacifica* lacks the white flank patch of *arctica*?; but no mention is made of this useful field character under either species. The maps are more complete than any previous ones for this massive land area, but any interpretation of them should allow for the fact that there are still large gaps in the knowledge. Eight colour plates depict the birds, their downy young and their eggs. There are 13½ pages of references, to 1984.

Any serious student of Palearctic ornithology should acquire this handbook. The next volume due is vol. 4 (Galliformes, Gruiformes), in 1987. DAVID A. CHRISTIE

British Warblers. By Eric Simms. Collins, London, 1985. 432 pages; six colour plates (by Ian Wallace); 44 black-and-white plates; 15 line-drawings and numerous maps and sonagrams. Hardback £20.00; paperback £9.95.

This is Eric Simms's third contribution to the highly acclaimed 'New Naturalist' series and keeps up the high standard now well established by the previous 70 volumes.

Three introductory chapters cover both Old World and New World warblers and summarise the British species, then the book soon settles into a series of chapters covering each of our breeding species fully, with shorter accounts of our rarer visitors. Eric Simms has obviously undertaken a very thorough literature search, as the bibliography lists over 1,000 references in several languages. Much of this reference material is dry and stuffy reading and it tests the skills of an author when it has to be sifted and summarised and presented in a more-readable fashion to the layman. In my opinion, he has done this admirably, and linked the whole thing together by injecting his personal experiences into the text, each account being full of concise facts and figures, juicy slices of personal narrative and liberally cross-referenced.

The author's personal interest in bird song comes across throughout the book and is mirrored by the numerous sonagrams and careful analysis of song and call transcriptions of each species. His interest in field identification of difficult species, however, is apparently only 'skin-deep', and little emphasis or discussion has been included in the accounts. Ian Wallace has contributed six colour plates, sadly depicting only the males of each species; I would have liked to have seen more plates, and perhaps a couple of chapters by Ian Wallace on the trickier elements of warbler identification: I am sure that this would have been a great asset to the book. Photographs could have been some compensation to get over the 'feel' of each species, but sadly, of the 24 photographs of birds, no less than 19 of them are of birds at the nest, where the character of each species is not shown to the best effect. More-thorough picture research could have turned up good photographs of almost all species away from the nest.

I found the lack of British distribution maps surprising; that, too, should have been an essential element of a work of this nature. Even the rarer visitors could have had their occurrences plotted, as done with Aquatic *Acrocephalus paludicola*, Melodious *Hippolais polyglotta* and Icterine Warblers *H. icterina* (incidentally the only British maps in the book).

These are minor quibbles about a book that I have thoroughly enjoyed reading; it has been a pleasure to dip into it when I have had the odd spare hour, and it is that sort of book; one to browse, or to read from cover to cover. The author and publisher are to be congratulated on yet another excellent volume for the series. I recommend *British Warblers* to all who wish to learn about 'this family of smaller species, abounding in numbers, and extremely interesting', as Jardine put it in 1839 (according to Eric Simms). S. C. MADGE