

Reviews

Handbuch der Vögel der Sowjetunion. Band 4. Galliformes, Gruiformes. Edited by R. L. Potapov and V. E. Flint. A. Ziemsen Verlag, Wittenberg Lutherstadt, 1989. 427 pages; 20 colour plates; 111 figures and maps. DM95.00.

Volume 4 of the German translation of this major handbook, the second to be published of a proposed ten volumes covering the Soviet Union, deals with pheasants and partridges (13 species), grouse (eight), button-quails (one), cranes (seven), rails, crakes and gallinules (12), and bustards (three)—a total of 44 species in 384 pages of text, maps, figures and tables. With nearly 11 pages devoted to introductions to orders and families, this works out at an average of about 8½ pages per species: the Coot *Fulica atra* gets most (23¼), while Yellow-legged Button-Quail *Turnix tanki* and the mainly-Nearctic Yellow Rail *Coturnicops noveboracensis* (only two nests found in the USSR, both in the nineteenth century) receive only 2½ each.

The general remarks made in my review of volume 1 (see *Brit. Birds* 79: 269-270) apply more or less equally to volume 4. For such matters as morphology, breeding biology and social behaviour, many species are covered as well or better in *BWP* or, particularly, *Handbuch der Vögel Mitteleuropas*; so in these cases the real value of this Soviet handbook lies in its information on distribution, population and movements, with arrival and departure dates, within the USSR, and in this respect the data are reasonably extensive. Generally, the maps appear to be fairly accurate (where this is possible with such a huge land-area) and thus of great use, while particulars on population densities and levels testify to the perhaps surprising amount of fieldwork that has been done in the USSR in recent decades. Especially welcome are the data on such endangered groups as cranes and bustards and such economically important groups as grouse. Equally important, the texts on those species not occurring in the West Palearctic are a valuable synthesis of present knowledge (and a good reminder of how much we have still to learn): those on *Porzana* (= *Rallina*) *paykullii*, the little-known Band-bellied or Siberian Ruddy Crane, which breeds only in a small area around the Amur and in northeast China and North Korea, on the far-eastern Asian Spruce Grouse *Falcipecten falcipecten*, on the five species of snowcock *Tetrao gallus* and on the mysterious Yellow-legged Button-Quail excite great interest in the mind of the West-Europe-based ornithologist and provide a stimulus for further research.

The plates are good, though more depictions of birds in flight would have been helpful; the black-and-white drawings are fairly simple, but attractive and instructive, showing aspects of behaviour. There are 33 pages of bibliography.

For readers of German, this volume is an exceedingly useful reference, and it is, of course, essential for serious students of Palearctic ornithology.

DAVID A. CHRISTIE

Latvian Breeding Bird Atlas 1980-1984. By J. Priednieks, M. Strazds, A. Strazds and A. Petrins. Edited by J. Viksnes. Latvian Ornithological Society, Salaspils, 1989. 350 pages; 208 line-drawings; 217 distribution maps. No price given.

There are 739 10×10 km squares wholly or partly in Latvia and the 130 observers who took part in this five-year breeding bird atlas project surveyed 701 of them (94.9%). This splendid book gives the results. Each species is mapped, using the standard dots of increasing size, in green on a black map outline. The unsurveyed squares are shown by pale grey shading, which greatly helps interpretation. The text is given wholly in English (as well as Russian), and explains and interprets the distributions in relation to geographical, habitat and climatic features, with details of censuses and densities of breeding pairs where these are available. Each species is illustrated with a small drawing, and the layout and production of the book are attractive, making this a very worthy addition to the series of national atlases which have now been published. Everyone interested in bird distributions in Europe will wish to own a copy of this fine work.

Readers will be interested to discover, for instance, that the Scarlet Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus* is more widespread in Latvia than is the Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*; that Red-backed Shrikes *Lanius collurio* were found in three-quarters of the squares, and in some places densities reached 7.0 pairs per km²; and that Corncrakes *Crex crex* were found in nearly 65% of squares, and that the species 'most frequently occurs in natural meadows', with 2.1 pairs

per km registered along the River Lielupe, but only 0.3 pairs per km in areas of intense agriculture. A treasure trove of information!

J. T. R. SHARROCK

A Bird Artist in Scotland. By Donald Watson. H. F. & G. Witherby Ltd, London, 1988. 144 pages; 20 colour illustrations; 26 black-and-white illustrations. £14.95.

My earliest recollection of the work of Donald Watson is of poring over his plates in *The Oxford Book of Birds* (1964). It was the only book in our school library illustrating more than just adult plumages. My next encounter came in Poyser's *Birdwatchers' Year* (1973), in which Donald Watson's year was my favourite: a compelling account of a year in Southwest Scotland, masterfully illustrated with some fine scraperboards.

A Bird Artist in Scotland is a book in two parts. The first section comprises five chapters in which Donald Watson relates his progress from early bird drawing to the present day—with lively accounts of the Scottish artists' scene (including tea with Thorburn!), and his wartime experiences—and gives an insight into his working methods.

The second section (covering perhaps two-thirds of the book) is an account of a year of Donald Watson's observations and thoughts in Galloway, presented as selected entries from a diary. In that respect, it is very like the earlier work in *Birdwatchers' Year*, but, with the years covered being some 18-20 years apart, the content is somewhat different: the first written when afforestation was in its infancy, the second when the hills are being invaded wholesale. It is written, as before, with acute observation, and a deep understanding of the habitat and its present problems. It is far from a gloomy account, for Donald Watson still gains much pleasure here both as an artist and as a naturalist, and this he passes on to his reader.

As one would hope, barely a page seems to pass without a 'moment-capturing' half-tone, scraperboard or colour plate to delight the reader. They are full of atmosphere, with bold but skilful treatment of colour and light, giving great depth and form. The paintings represent work from throughout the artist's life, and many appear 'tighter' in style than those that I have seen at recent Society of Wildlife Artists' exhibitions. One minor quibble: I should have liked to have seen the painting dimensions included in the plate captions.

The inclusion of a list of the birds of Galloway may seem a little odd, but once you have read the book (and I hope you do) you will find it is every bit as much about Galloway as it is about the artist.

All in all, a splendid book (it could easily have been two), well produced, and a must for all interested in bird art and Scotland.

ALAN HARRIS