

Reviews

The Birds of Oxfordshire. Edited by J. W. Brucker, A. G. Gosler & A. R. Heryet. The Nature Conservation Bureau, Newbury, 1992. 288 pages; 8 colour plates; 150 line-drawings; 92 maps; 57 histograms. £27.95.

The species accounts occupy one-third of this county avifauna, and a further 10% is devoted to the results of the 'Atlas of breeding birds in Oxfordshire' (by tetrads) during 1985-88. The other major chapters are 'An introduction to the ornithology of Oxfordshire', 'Bird habitats in Oxfordshire', 'The climate of Oxfordshire' and 'A future for birds in Oxfordshire'. Those are the dry bones, but in this book the traditional framework is fleshed out voluptuously. This is a large book (21.7 cm × 29.7 cm), with easy-to-read print, excellent, spacious design, attractive line-drawings (by Martin Elliott, Andrew Forkner and Ian Lewington) and an abundance of small tables, histograms and maps.

The text is not only full of interesting information, but is also well written and, therefore, very readable as well. Collectors of county bird books will, of course, want to own this one, but it will also be of interest to all birdwatchers living not only in Oxfordshire itself, but also in neighbouring counties, since trends in one are likely to be reflected in others. Nighthjars *Caprimulgus europaeus* have not been proved to breed since the mid 1960s, and Redstarts *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*, which formerly bred in pollarded willows along streams and rivers and in old trees, dry-stone walls and nest-boxes in woods and parks, have steadily withdrawn from the county, those nesting in pollarded willows disappearing first 'suggesting that this was the less favoured of the two main habitat types'. This whole book is filled with such interesting snippets. Very good use has been made of the information gathered by the county's birdwatchers over the years. The authors have clearly gone to a great deal of trouble not merely to summarise what has previously been published in the annual county bird reports, but also to delve into the stored, previously unpublished data.

I do not know a better county avifauna.

J. T. R. SHARROCK

Kingfishers, Bee-eaters and Rollers: a handbook. By C. Hilary Fry, Kathie Fry & Alan Harris. Christopher Helm (Publishers), London, 1992. 324 pages; 40 colour plates; line-illustrations and diagrams. £27.99.

This is the latest in the Helm identification guide series and matches the high standard of its predecessors. It covers 123 species in 40 full-colour plates by Alan Harris.

The layout is good, with lots of space, intelligent use of bold captioning in the text, and small vignettes dropped in here and there.

The introductory chapters on the groups covered are fascinating. I did not know of the Shovel-billed Kingfisher (Shovel-billed Kookaburra) *Clytoceyx rex*, but now that I do I want to see one. Reading the early chapters enticed me into reading the rest of the text, where, as is stated by the authors, a lot more is known about the habits of some species than others: compare Pied Kingfisher *Ceryle rudis* (4½ pages) with Timor Kingfisher (Cinnamon-backed Kingfisher) *Halcyon australasia* (1 page).

The plates are up to Alan Harris's usual high standard: the birds are good, and the background hints very nice, the only thing that niggled being the white background - but that is a minor point. On a professional level, I liked plate 2 especially, for the feather technique.

Kingfishers and rollers, and to a lesser extent bee-eaters, are 'wait-and-see hunters', so the similarity of poses creates a problem for the artist. This does, however, facilitate easy comparisons. My personal favourite was plate 5 (I wish I had painted it). On the down side, some of the birds look a bit too pale: Carmine Bee-eater *Merops nubicus*, Woodland Kingfisher *Halcyon senegalensis*, Belted Kingfisher *Megaceryle alcyon* and European Roller *Coracias garrulus*; the Dollarbird *Eurystomus orientalis* looks a bit squashed; and the wings of the flying Black-capped Kingfisher *Halcyon pileata* are perhaps a trifle short. Some plates (e.g. 13, 14, 33) are a little packed for my taste, but whenever I gaze at plates 2 and 6 I think 'Lovely!'

In short, this book is nice to look at, with good dust cover, is reasonably priced, easy to read and a splendid addition to this excellent series. Put it on your Christmas present list or buy it now.

DAVE NURNEY

Where to Watch Birds in Cumbria, Lancashire & Cheshire. By **Jonathan Guest & Malcolm Hutcheson.** Christopher Helm (Publishers), London, 1992. 225 pages; 51 maps; 33 illustrations. Paperback £10.99.

Authors of 'Where to Watch' guides face the problem of which places to omit. These authors admit to a sensible bias towards coastal sites, 'partly because it is difficult to identify agricultural and moorland sites that can absorb visitors without consequential harm to the birds.' That same spirit of consideration has ensured that they are discreet in their references to rarer breeding birds.

All the larger localities are treated under the headings 'Habitat', 'Species', 'Access', 'Timing' and 'Calendar'. In compiling their species lists, authors typically seek to sell the attractions of localities, but I wonder whether it would be more realistic if such lists were limited to say the past five years. I fancy I recognise some of my own one-off birding highlights from a decade or two ago.

Access is dealt with in conjunction with the maps, and with OS map references. There are useful hints about car parking, and public services, and exhortations about the need to maintain good relationships with landowners. 'Where we are aware of restrictions on access, these are detailed'; but there can be slip-ups, for a private hide on Bassenthwaite Lake is listed.

'Timing' gives sensible tips on the best time of day, tide or week to choose for your visit, while 'Calendar' lists how the bird populations change with the changing seasons.

The guide, which is generously illustrated by delicate bird portraits from the pen of David Mead, should provide the key to many enjoyable days a-birding in these three northern counties.

ROBERT SPENCER