



Reviews

Finches and Sparrows: an identification guide. By Peter Clement. Illustrated by Alan Harris & John Davis. Christopher Helm Publishers, London, 1993. 500 pages; 73 colour plates; 44 line-drawings; over 280 distribution maps. ISBN 0-7136-8017-2. £29.99.

This is another of the identification guides which are fast becoming almost a classic series from the Christopher Helm stable, and it keeps up the generally very high standard. It covers all the true finches of the Fringillidae (i.e. Fringillinae and Carduelinae), the waxbills and allies of the Estrilidae and the true sparrows of the Passeridae—in all, 256 finches and 34 sparrows.

As are previous such volumes, this book is solely an identification guide. There is a short section in each species account devoted to status, habitat and behaviour, but this is aimed purely at where you can find the bird, with almost no mention of its ecology or behaviour. The other sections give full and detailed descriptions of the various plumages, voice, measurements, movements, geographic variation and distribution, and each account starts with a useful 'field characters' section, which deals explicitly with how to distinguish the species from similar ones.

Any identification guide will be judged largely by its plates. The 73 here are almost uniformly excellent, although some are fairly crowded, but why did Alan Harris not do them all? John Davis was allowed only ten.

Seeing this book has made me wonder, not for the first time, at whom this series is aimed and what the books are used for. The author says it is for use in the field. Fine, but it is a book about only one group of birds, and I for one am more likely to take into the field a book which will help me identify all the birds I am likely to see, and, if I am going abroad, weight is likely to dictate my taking only one or two larger reference books, again preferably for all the birds of the area rather than one family or group.

Partly as a result, I find the almost complete lack of any other information about the birds frustrating. For example, by reading this book, one would never know that any work had been done on Zebra Finches *Taeniopygia guttata*, that some of the classic bird-song work was done on Chaffinches *Fringilla coelebs* or that Bullfinches *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* are notorious among orchard farmers. Having said that, though, it is billed as an identification guide and there is no doubt that, as a collection of plates and descriptions of what the birds look like, there is no serious competition. PETER LACK

Birds on Film: a photographic diary. By Steve Young. Hobby Publications, Liverpool, 1994. 115 pages; 175 colour plates. ISBN 1-872839-02-9. Paperback £14.99.

I hope that this book sells well. I hope that Steve Young continues to go twitching. I hope that he produces a book like this every year.

This book features 175 of Steve Young's photographs, mostly of rarities seen on a year's twitching during 1993. The text is in diary form, and—even for a non-twitcher such as myself—makes interesting and sometimes exciting light reading. Steve Young also does more than merely tick off and photograph the birds, for there are glimpses of interesting observations (such as the wing-clapping by the Cley Pacific Swift *Apus pacificus*), as well as amusing asides (Steve Young does not think much of Dungeness, a place best left to Daleks).

This is an excellent way to acquire a set of splendid photographs of 1993 rarities for a mere £14.99. For once, the publisher's blurb does not exaggerate: Steve Young 'is without doubt one of the UK's top bird photographers'.

Other bird photographers will welcome the photographic details given for every shot, and the odd comment within the diary text concerning difficulties encountered and how these were overcome. There are also accounts of Steve's share of unsuccessful twitches, borne with affable resignation (at least in retrospect and in print).

I have enjoyed vicariously sharing Steve Young's year.

J. T. R. SHARROCK