



# Review

## RAPTORS OF THE WORLD

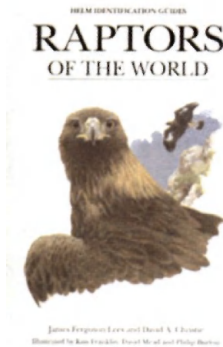
By James Ferguson-Lees & David A. Christie. Illustrated by Kim Franklin, David Mead & Philip Burton. Christopher Helm, A & C Black, London, 2001. 992 pages; 112 colour plates; maps; line-drawings. ISBN 0-7136-8026-1. Hardback, £49.00.

The birdwatching world has been waiting nearly two decades for this book. Had it appeared on schedule, in the 1980s, it would surely have been heralded as a classic. Now, readers will judge for themselves whether this is still the case. Does it add significantly to the backdrop of excellent regional guides and handbooks (including those dealing specifically with raptors) that have been published during its long gestation period? The appearance in 1994 of volume 2 of the *Handbook of the Birds of the World*, which deals with birds of prey, will also have an impact on people's reactions to this new book. Notwithstanding, this is the first book to be published that covers all of the world's raptors in sufficient detail for serious identification purposes and, furthermore, it succeeds.

First, let me describe the tome. It is in the same 'Helm' series as *Seabirds*, *Shorebirds* and *Wildfowl*. With its 992 pages, it is, however, more than twice as thick as any of those. This is not the result of its dealing with many more species (it covers 313 raptor species, compared with, for example, 312 in *Seabirds*), but because it contains no fewer than 620 pages of detailed species texts.

The introductory sections cover the following topics in moderate detail: topography; measuring raptors; sex and age differences; identification techniques; migration; moult and

ageing; vision and hearing; plumages and structure; taxonomy and nomenclature; and, finally, English names. All are well researched, although sometimes too detailed and pedantic. The short summary on migration is succinct and very useful. Almost by definition, taxonomy will always be out of date and this is the case here, with some decisions having been made more than ten years ago. It is a pity that a phylogenetic tree was not produced to help the reader to understand relationships, which are not easily derived from the rather complicated text. The authors have done their best with their selection of English names, but this subject will



inevitably continue to cause controversy until the International Ornithological Congress eventually comes up with an 'agreed' world list.

Then come the 112 plates, with captions and maps opposite. Both perched and flying birds are depicted (usually between five and ten illustrations per species). Rightly or wrongly, these plates will be the test of the book's acceptability by the birding world. They are highly competent, and some are excellent, but, with over 2,000 illustrations, there is inevitably a variation in standard. While I am sure that there will be criticism of the 'woodenness' of some, especially the falcons, they

appear to be accurate in terms of plumage, even though at times lacking in jizz. I found myself wanting to reorganise the illustrations on each plate to put them into a more user-friendly order. Furthermore, I do not like numbers against each picture, which refer to a numbered caption opposite. In my copy I have already started to write the name/age/sex by each picture. The publishers should really have thought about the needs of the reader more carefully.

The bulk of the book is composed of the species accounts. These cover more than just identification, dealing also with distribution, migration, food, behaviour, breeding and population. There is also a map for each species, which is a black-and-white duplication of that opposite the species' illustration on the plates. These maps are accurate and appear to have been well researched, though that for Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* incorrectly omits breeding for much of central Europe. On a personal note, I would have liked to have seen more detailed discussion of the intriguing and isolated buzzard *Buteo* population that breeds on Socotra (included here within the nominate race of Common Buzzard *B. buteo buteo*).

This is a great contribution to our ornithological armoury, but if I were a publisher embarking on a project of this magnitude, and with the wonderful gift of hindsight, I would have used a team of artists and authors to ensure its speedy and undated production. I would have made greater use of electronic editing to enable evolving issues such as taxonomy to be right up to date. And it would have been so nice to have seen 'Socotra Buzzard' as a full species; but that is another story.

Richard Porter