Palearctic birds

Special Review by K. H. Voous


Although the Palearctic unites such seemingly diverse areas as Britain, the Mediterranean countries, Siberia and Japan in one zoogeographical entity, the avifaunas of all parts of this huge Old World region have so much in common that any European ornithologist is always able to find his way far more easily among the birds of, for example, Japan than those of, say, West Africa. A survey of the whole Palearctic avifauna, including recent information from such relatively little known countries as Iran and China, is therefore of great value to ornithologists throughout Europe and the vast area of temperate Asia. Such a survey is the far-reaching purpose of the present book, written by so able a systematist as Charles Vaurie, curator of ornithology at the American Museum of Natural History. It is, in fact, the second volume of this important work. The first volume, published in 1959 and reviewed by Kenneth Williamson in this journal in 1960 (Brit. Birds, 53: 233-256), dealt with the Passeriformes. This companion volume therefore completes what may be regarded as a modern revision of Ernst Hartert’s great Die Vögel der Paläarktischen Fauna (1903-38).

The Birds of the Palearctic Fauna is a systematic list of all the bird species breeding in the Palearctic, together with a review of their geographical races or subspecies. The present volume, the basis for which was laid by twenty issues (nos. 34-53) of Dr. Vaurie’s ‘Systematic Notes on Palearctic Birds’ in American Museum Novitates between 1958 and 1963, covers 559 species. Others which occur regularly, or even occasionally, but which actually belong to some other faunal region of the world, are listed by name in separate notes at the end of each family, as are species which breed just outside the southern border of

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the Palearctic, such as the Marabou *Leptoptilos crumeniferus* and the Nubian Bustard *Neotis nuba*.

The scope, treatment and typography are of the same high standard as in the first volume, but there are some slight differences which, although they are only matters of degree, make the present volume even more excellent. For example, the treatment is less drastic and there are not so many clean sweeps of traditional races and generic names (or have we become accustomed to this habit?); as a result, the whole work is more balanced. At the same time, the fruits of Dr. Vaurie's contacts with Russian ornithologists are even more apparent, and the distribution of each species is also given in greater detail. On the other hand, the habitat sections have not been similarly expanded and are therefore not always satisfactory. For instance, the description of the habitat of the Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* as 'similar to that of *A. ferina* or *A. nyroca*, but more common on the sea coast' does not give credit to observed differences in the preferences of these species.

A systematic reference such as this deals with three major subjects—systematics, nomenclature and distribution—which I propose to discuss separately as I consider them independent disciplines.

**Systematics**

(a) **Sequence.** The sequence of orders and families is more or less that of the Wetmore system, starting with the Struthioniformes (ostriches) and Gaviiformes (divers) and concluding with the Piciformes (wrynecks, piculets and woodpeckers). However, there are a number of deviations for which no reasons appear to be given. As the scientific significance of such alterations in a linear sequence is nil, any new sequence is unnecessarily impractical. For instance, the sequences of families within the Pelecaniformes (frigate-birds, pelicans, gannets, cormorants and darters), Ciconiiformes (herons, ibises and storks), Gruidae (cranes, bustards, rails and button-flags) and Coraciiformes (rollers, kingfishers, bee-eaters and hoopoes) are drastically different from those published in Alexander Wetmore's most recent classification (*Smiths. Misc. Coll.*, 139 (11): 1-37). In addition, some groups treated by Wetmore as families have been reduced to subfamilial rank, but this is of small scientific importance and has few unfortunate repercussions; examples are the Tetraoninae (grouse), Numidinae (guineafowl), Scolopacidae (snipe and sandpipers), Recurvirostrinae (avocets and stilts), Phalaropidae (phalaropes), Stercorariinae (skuas) and Tytoninae (barn owls).

(b) **Genera.** The delimitation of genera is being given much attention nowadays and has provoked numerous controversial publications in almost all fields of zoology, though in few of these papers have real scientific problems been involved. Fortunately for the stability of our
ornithological nomenclature and, for that matter, for the practical use of binomials, Dr. Vaurie has been very cautious in steering between the Scylla of over-lumping and the Charybdis of over-splitting. I was delighted to note the maintenance of such genus names as Pterodroma (not lumped with Bulweria), Puffinus (not with Procellaria), Bubuleus (not with Ardea), Egretta (not with Ardea), Hieraëtus (not with Aquila), Eudromias (not with Charadrius) and Ketupa (not with Bubo), to mention just a few. On the other hand, I can appreciate the lumping of the odd genus Xema (Sabine's Gull) with Larus. No two authors would agree completely in the handling of genera and this is not so much to be deplored as the people who compile check-lists would seem to think. It is a measure of the freedom of personal scientific interpretation. Even so, I do not understand (and no reasons are given) why the Grey-rumped Sandpiper and Wandering Tatler have been included in the genus Tringa (as T. brevipes and T. incana) while the Terek Sandpiper has been left out (as Xenus cinereus). Surely all or none should be in Tringa.

(c) Species. The species concept as handled by Dr. Vaurie is neither noteworthyily ‘narrow’ nor particularly ‘broad’. I have repeatedly stated elsewhere my preference for a moderately conservative treatment in reference lists of this kind and Dr. Vaurie seems to have been only slightly more progressive than that. Nevertheless, his rather narrow species concept in such cases as the Black-throated Diver (divided into Gavia arctica and G. pacifica), Peregrine (divided into Falco peregrinus and F. pelegrinoides) and Tatler (divided into Tringa incana and T. brevipes) does not seem to be indisputably substantiated at present. Again, the sequence of species within a genus is often a most controversial subject. Fortunately, however, Dr. Vaurie has followed J. L. Peters’s Check-List of Birds of the World for the most part, though there are some notable exceptions.

(d) Subspecies. Dr. Vaurie gives considerable attention to the subject of geographical variation and, hence, to the recognition of subspecies. The pattern of variation is usually discussed separately, before the actual list of races, and this is a most fortunate treatment. Regular clinal variation is a big challenge to the practical use of subspecific names and it is probable that no two authors would favour the same solution in every case, but, on the whole, Dr. Vaurie’s use of subspecific names will probably satisfy the majority of taxonomists. Nevertheless, the suppression of any named subspecies in the cases of the Gyr Falcon Falco rusticolus and Little Bustard Otis tetrax came as a surprise to me. Dr. Vaurie’s rejection of numerous ‘traditional’ races is usually well founded. However, his recognition of Falco peregrinus calidus as the Old World arctic form of the Peregrine—a race which is hardly, if at all, separable by plumage characters or measurements, but
which is characterised by migration habits—will probably not be
favoured by many of those who know the intricate problems of
geographical variation in this species, particularly as Dr. Vaurie has
simultaneously rejected other races of equally doubtful status.

Nomenclature
Throughout this work, as was to be expected, the nomenclature
almost completely conforms to the present International Code of Zoological
Nomenclature (1961). Dr. Vaurie even follows the decision of the
International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature to use the
generic name Gallinago Brisson for snipe, although this is deplored by
not a few zoologists. However, according to articles 27 and 32(c) of
the International Code, the diareses and hyphens in such names as
Hieraaëtus and Hirund-apus should have been deleted, making these
Hieraaetus and Hirundapus respectively. At the same time, if the rules
of priority are adhered to, the family name Threskiornithidae (spoon-
bills and ibises) should have been replaced by Plataleidae (see P.

Nomenclatural confusion still reigns over the name for the Caspian
Tern. This is Hydroprogne caspia (Pallas, 1770) in the North American
and British check-lists and throughout much of the European litera-
ture, but Dr. Vaurie has opted for H. tschegrava (Lepechin, 1770) and
gives reasons for doing so. A decision on this matter by the Inter-
national Commission on Zoological Nomenclature seems very desir-
able.

Distribution
The geographical distribution of each species and subspecies is carefully
outlined and Dr. Vaurie has succeeded in keeping it remarkably up-to-
date. Ensuring that such information is completely up-to-date is very
difficult, however, as I have found myself, and a minute search through
the text will inevitably reveal such minor omissions as the sensational
breeding of the Bee-eater Merops apiaster in Sussex in 1955 (though the
attempted nesting near Edinburgh in 1920 is referred to).

Comparison with other check-lists
Dr. Vaurie’s work compares most favourably with the Check-list of the
Birds of Great Britain and Ireland (1952) and the Check-list of North
American Birds (1957). Compared with the British check-list, there is a
more balanced use of generic names and much greater common sense
over matters of nomenclature. The unfounded wide use of Procel-
laria, Bulweria and Charadrius has largely been abandoned though I
deplore Dr. Vaurie’s continued use of Procellaria, instead of Puffinus, for
the Atlantic or Cory’s Shearwater P. diomedea and the White-faced
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Shearwater *P. leucomeles*; these birds seem to have little in common with the Cape Hen *Procellaria aequinoctialis* which is the type species of Linnaeus's name *Procellaria*. The treatment of the Red Grouse as *Lagopus lagopus scoticus*—in other words, as conspecific with the circumpolar Willow Grouse—is another improvement over the British check-list. Similarly, the North American check-list's restricted use of generic and specific names has not been continued by Dr. Vaurie. For example, *Olor cygnus* (for the Whooper Swan) is replaced by the more widely accepted and understandable *Cygnus cygnus*, *Chen hyperboreus* (Snow Goose) by *Anser hyperboreus*, *Anas carolinensis* (Green-winged Teal) by *Anas crecca carolinensis*, *Mareca penelope* (Wigeon) by *Anas penelope*, *Squatarola squatarola* (Grey Plover) by *Pluvialis squatarola*, *Erolia alpina* (Dunlin) by *Calidris alpina*, *Crocethia alba* (Sanderling) by *Calidris alba*, *Himantopus mexicanus* (Black-necked Stilt) by *Himantopus himantopus mexicanus* and *Lobipes lobatus* (Red-necked Phalarope) by *Phalaropus lobatus*.

All in all, *The Birds of the Palearctic Fauna* is a very fine and most indispensable work which does not attempt to settle or 'freeze' the still numerous systematic problems affecting the avifauna of this region. The author deserves much appreciation and congratulation for his many wise and moderate decisions.