

Book Reviews

Book Review Editor's Note: We are continuing to use the current currency codes. Thus Canadian dollars are CAD, U.S. dollars are USD, Euros are EUR, China Yuan Remimbi are CNY, Australian dollars are AUD and so on.

ZOOLOGY

Birds of Australia – 8th Edition

By Ken Simpson and Nicolas Day. 2010. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey. 381 pages. 39.50 USD, Softcover.

I have been very impressed over the years with the Princeton Field Guides series. Each guide packs a lot of information into a relatively small package. This 8th edition of the *Birds of Australia* is no exception.

I have to confess that I have not been to Australia ¼ but I plan to go in the next few years, and this book will be in my carry-on baggage along with my binoculars. It has a durable waterproof cover and high quality paper, both of which should hold up well in the field.

Its organisational structure is similar to most field guides, starting with small sections on how to use the book and tips on bird observation. Some of the tips I don't recall seeing in any other guide, such as how diseases, light, staining and pollen all can affect plumage colours and thus, identification. I would have preferred to see these followed by the section (near the back of the book) on "vegetation and land form habitats," which includes concise descriptions of the various habitat terms used in the following species descriptions. Next is a "key to the families," which is useful, although the divisions between family, tribe and sub-family are given equal weight and might be confusing. The families are less clear in the main field information section of the book, where each page header indicates which families are represented there, but on multi-family pages it's not clear which species are in which family, as they are lumped together with no divisions.

The "field information" for each species is spare, using a combination of codes (abundance, movement, endemism) and brief text, which describes male, female and juvenile plumages, size, voice and habitat. A lot of information is also packed into the thumbnail-sized range maps, which show breeding and non-breeding ranges, areas of sparse records and migration trends. If there is more than one race, the map has a capital letter which corresponds to the name of the race, given below the map, and often referred to in the text. A close reading of the "codes used in this book" section will enable the reader to glean the most out of the information.

Between the text and the range map is usually an exquisite pen-and-ink drawing (over 900 in the book) that illustrates other plumages, closeups of confusing field marks, different races, flight patterns, behavioural postures (such as tail flick), or additional field marks. These are an excellent adjunct to the facing colour plates. The 132 plates illustrate both sexes and frequently show juveniles and different races also. Many of the plates also show similar species close together on the page for easy comparison, and many show the birds in typical habitat.

This "field information" section, which is the bulk of the book, covers residents and more frequent visitors, while 85 species of "vagrants, waifs, strays and overshoots" are covered in the following "vagrant bird bulletin." Here there are no facing colour plates, but small colour drawings are sandwiched between the field description and the distribution map.

The last extensive section covers "breeding information" in an interesting way, by giving a short description of the life cycle of a bird then a "breeding summary," which includes: courtship, nest description, number and description of eggs, length of incubation period and which sex incubates, hatching and fledging details, and parental care. This is followed by bar graphs showing the breeding season for each species within the family. My biggest quibble with the book is here. While grouped by family, the species sequence for the bar graphs is not the same as in the "field information," rather appearing to be random (not even alphabetical, which would have been useful). This is confusing and makes it hard to locate the species you are interested in. It would also be a simple matter to include page numbers beside each bar graph that would link back to the descriptions and colour plates.

For those birders who can afford to island hop or are building their life lists with island endemics, there is a short section on "Australian island territories checklists" which is organised by major oceanic island. A quibble here is that while Lord Howe Island is shown

on the introductory map, the others are not, although their geographic coordinates are listed in the checklists. For those not intimately familiar with South Pacific geography, a location map for these island territories would be helpful.

The first appendix covers “hints for birdwatchers” on equipment, legal issues, safety, birdcraft and bushcraft, and some excellent tips on “birdwatching in various habitats.” These are followed by a short glossary,

a list of birdwatching and naturalist organisations and a “core library” list. Finally, there are separate indices for Latin and common names, and a “quick index to field information.”

All-in-all this is an excellent guide and I look forward to giving mine a good field test in the near future.

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The Birds of Barbados

By P. A. Buckley, Edward B. Massiah, Maurice B. Hutt, Francine G. Buckley and Hazel F. Hutt. 2009. British Ornithologists' Union, P.O. Box 417, Peterborough, PE7 3FX UK. 295 pages. 40 GBP.

Barbados has long been a popular destination for Canadian sun seekers. But beautiful beaches and coral reefs aside, what does it have to offer the visiting birder? Being a small island it has limited species diversity — thirty species makes a good birding day — and only one endemic bird species, and that perhaps one of the duller birds on the planet (the recently split Barbados Bullfinch). The answer lies in the wind, more precisely, the trade winds. The same winds that first blew European explorers to the Caribbean routinely transport Afro- Eurasian vagrants to Barbados. This factor, coupled with its proximity to South America, makes it the “Scilly Islands” of the Americas, with a jaw-dropping list of vagrants and “firsts” for the Americas.

This rich record is amply documented in the latest instalment of the British Ornithological Union *Birds of...* series. In keeping with the rest of the series, it is a scholarly, extensively researched work; more than an annotated list, it is a comprehensive study of the island's avifauna, both resident and visiting. There is an extensive introductory section which describes the island's ecology and its history, including the accounts of early naturalists. There is an exhaustive discussion of the ecology of the island and its avifauna, touching on various species groupings (seabirds, shorebirds, land birds, etc.) and concepts (endemism, the role of migration and vagrancy, etc.) There are also 24 appendices touching on an extensive array of topics, everything from Christmas Bird Counts and ringing [banding] returns to the likely proximate geographical origins of the island's avifauna and Barbados bird holdings in major museum collections. There are particularly intriguing sections on “enigmatic historical taxa” and “historical apocrypha” which, in addition to expanding one's vocabulary, provide a fascinating glimpse into the past.

Like all works on regional avifauna the heart of the book is the systematic list, and this is where it shines. Each species receives a comprehensive treatment including a description of its range in the world and in the West Indies and, of course, its occurrence in Barbados. The latter includes the first known mention of the species, followed by an extensive discussion of

its historical and present status. This account includes seasonal information such as the earliest arrival or latest departure dates for migratory species, along with a discussion on its breeding status on the island. For species which occur only rarely, details are provided for each sighting. Included in each account is the often evocative local name for the bird, if one exists. Most of the species accounts conclude with a comments section which may touch on a variety of subjects such as the taxonomic status of the bird or interesting ringing returns. The text is complemented by many tables, maps and colour plates, the latter including aerial photographs of various aspects of the island, photographs of some typical Bajan birds and a pot pourri of exciting vagrant species. The book ends with an extensive (20 page) list of references and a detailed index. It is worth highlighting that this is not a “where to go birding” book, nor is it a guide to identification, for that one must look elsewhere.

Despite being relatively slight, there is so much packed into this book that it is hard to navigate. This is not aided by a confusing format. For example, the annotated list starts only on page 76, and then only after a long annotated list of “unsupported” species. It should also be noted that the authors have taken a liberal approach to taxonomic questions, thus, “Golden Warbler” is treated as a full species, distinct from “American Yellow Warbler”. While some may see this as jumping the taxonomic gun, it is useful for a regional work to delineate the occurrence of recognizable forms, recognizing that the consensus on species limits will ebb and flow over time.

The *Birds of Barbados* sets a new bar for Caribbean ornithology, and will be equally at home in a university ecology course or a birder's library. It is a fitting tribute to Maurice and Hazel Hutt, who passed away prior to its completion, and follows in the tradition of the venerable James Bond, author of the classic work on Caribbean birds. I would highly recommend this book to anyone with an interest in Caribbean ornithology and ecology.

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