

there are several cages of birds from the waxbill family. Their names, firetail, parrotfinch and firefinch, evoke their arresting colours, and HBW 15 has page after beautifully-painted page of these little birds.

In this company the poor vireos look dowdy. Most of the 52 species are small greeny-grey birds that give many birders identification problems. Fortunately the Finches are another large group of colourful, entertaining birds. I have rarely been in a locality where I did not see at least one pretty, little finch species. While many cause excitement amongst birders in one locality, it is not because the bird is rare, but because they wander from other localities. Redpolls, crossbills, chaffinches and rosy finches can all cause hearts to flutter in some parts of the world.

The chapter on Hawaiian Honeycreepers is rather sad. All of these species are colourful, mostly red or yellow, and with interesting profiles. Of the 40 or so original species 16 to 19 are extinct, a poor reflection on human stewardship of those lovely islands. The photos and plates evoke the magic of the Pacific and somewhat offset "the relationship [being] ... one of tragedy."

The enigmatic Olive Warbler has bounced around genera and now sits as a single species in *Peucedramus*. The taxonomist dilemma notwithstanding, it is an attractive bird sought after by visitors to the southern United States and Mexico.

The final group are the misnamed New World Warblers. [I prefer the Canadian French *Paruline* – Yellow-rumped Paruline even *Parula* Paruline sounds fine to me]. In summer plumage at least, this is another collection of attractively-coloured birds. The "warblers" have many ardent fans in North America and I am certain these people will be pleased by HBW 15's coverage.

In addition to the excellent illustrations there is an equally excellent text. I was amused to find that even HBW has some complications with taxonomists, and

this has resulted in extra half-plate. The descriptions plainly show the differences in eastern and western populations of Warbling Vireos, the stronger colouration of the green morph Pine Siskins [sometimes confused with "Vagrant" Eurasian Siskins in North America], the separation of indigo birds in Africa and the hard-to-separate redpolls. The polymorphic Red-billed Quelea has three full illustrations and an extra the male heads while the text expertly covers its wide variability. The status, conservation and distribution is dealt with generically in the introductory passages and specifically for each species. For example, the now, widespread distribution of the Common Waxbill is referenced, but only the native range is shown on the map.

The Foreword was an essay on the Conservation of the World's Birds. It is a well researched, informative and thoroughly illustrated by charts and graphs. It gives any reader a clear, if depressing, overview of the status of all birds. Naturally the author concentrates on species at risk, but there is sufficient data to show where all the bird populations are headed. While many issues will be known to avid birders I am sure we can all learn something new. I did; I did not realise people were poisoning vulture so these birds did not give away their poaching activities. However, I think the essay's real value is how it focusses all the individual problems [loss of albatross to long-lining, tropical forest destruction for soya beans, the impact of cats etc.] into a coherent whole.

Overall this is another superb addition to this vast reference work. I repeatedly go back to older editions to resolve numerous issues and this volume will join those ranks. This is a book for every serious birder and researcher.

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## Natural History. The Ultimate Visual Guide to Everything on Earth

By Becky Alexander. 2010. Smithsonian/Dorling Kindersley, Tourmaline Editions Inc., 662 King Street West, Suite 304, Toronto, Ontario M5V 1M7. 648 pages. \$55.00 CAD Cloth.

Some time ago I loaned one of my favourite books [The Natural History of Europe. By Harry Garms. 1967. Paul Hamlyn Ltd., London.] to a friend. It is an old, illustrated guide to the birds, mammals, reptiles, plants etc. While this may, as a collection of allsorts, not be a book for the purist, but I have found it very useful on my trips to Europe. The species illustrated are the commoner ones; those you are most likely to see on a short trip.

Natural History claims to be the ultimate visual guide to everything on earth – a profound claim! Will this do the same thing for the world as my old book does for Europe? The book covers rocks, plants, animals and the species in between. In 648 pages it cannot go into

great detail, but only achieve an understanding of the basics. So how well does it do?

It does it very well. The book is logically and clearly organized into rocks, minerals, fossils and the domains, kingdoms, phyla or divisions, classes, orders, and families of the living world. As in every DK book I have read, the illustrations are beautiful; whether this is an Amoeba or a Bird of Paradise. From about five to a dozen species are shown on each page. They are photographs, stripped of the background and placed on the white page. This is a good way to show the species characteristics. It is illuminating to see in this way those species we do not normally see well [fish, worms and parasites].

A good example is the molluscan class of Cephalopods. Twenty-one species are shown; covering the nautili, cuttlefish, squids and octopi. A double page is given over to the Common Octopus so that individual characteristics [skin, beak, suckers, etc.] can be explained. The species are selected to show the diversity of forms, colours and life styles. Similarly there are 48 species of turtles, with a double page spread on the Aldabran Giant Tortoise. Examples have been chosen from around the world; from the cute 13 cm Spotted Turtle to the 1.2 m Galapagos Tortoise. The authors show that even the turtles simply designed shell can vary from smooth to knobby, soft to hard, patterned or plain.

Plants get a similar coverage. The orchids are represented by 27 species that cover most of the major genera. Curiously the Phalaenopsis [the second most important pot flower in US commerce] are represented by a man-made hybrid rather than a wild species such as *P. equestris* or *amabilis*. Even more surprising is the great Cattleyas are missing. The double page is given to *Dinema polybulbon* [1831; This species is more usually referred to by the 1788 *Epidendrum polybulbon* – a delightful miniature [mine has just flowered].

So you can find pages on albatross to kinglets, blue whales to shrews and liverworts to spruces. There is a little of everything; bacteria, algae, ferns, trees, fungi, sea life, worms, spiders, crustaceans, insects, fish and frogs. To help the reader the top edges of the seven sections are colour coded. Oddly the plant page corners are tinged purple, not green.

## Essential Ornithology

By Graham Scott. 2010. Oxford University Press, 198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016. 172 + x pages. \$55.00 USD Paper.

This is an excellent overview of ornithology, academically sound yet also attractive for amateurs. Graham Scott is an English scientist, the author of the well-received *Essential Animal Behaviour* (2005). In *Essential Ornithology* he presents a concise yet comprehensive overview of birds and their biology in a format that is both attractive and innovative.

The book is very well thought out and well organized. The seven chapter titles provide a succinct summary of its contents: “Evolution of birds,” “Feathers and flight,” “Movement: migration and navigation,” “Eggs, nests and chicks,” “Reproduction,” “Foraging and avoiding predators,” and “Populations, communities, and conservation.”

Each chapter begins with an interesting or unique quotation, dating from the 18th century through to 2005, and throughout the book Scott reinforces his general arguments with interesting specifics. Key points are highlighted and key references are also provided in the margin. Also in the margin are 9 “Concepts” and 26 “Flight Paths”, which provide quick cross-references

To claim to be the ultimate visual guide to everything on earth is rather sweeping. Any reader will quickly pick out the deficiencies and disparities. There is no mention of enigmatic stalagmites or beautiful sand roses. Nor do pearls of any kind appear in these pages. When a genus is included it may get disproportionate coverage. Only 0.5 percent of willows are pictured, yet the popular penguins get 70 percentage coverage. Lichens, while there are good examples of each type, are only on two pages. If they included all the North Americans lichens alone the book would grow by over 100 pages. The flowering plants show a bias towards the temperate zones. Few Arctic plants are included and the tropical trees tend to disappear into the woodwork [pun!]. Another characteristic I find irritating is the way the publisher has mixed illustration sizes. For example, the 2 cm Gold Beetle is depicted three times the size of the 7.6 cm Stag beetle and the 3.2 m Atlantic Sailfish is eclipsed by the 6 cm Mandarin fish.

These comments notwithstanding, I think this is a great book to buy, particularly for a family. It is easy to get a broad perspective of the natural world and the format and layout make it simple to use. It is a super reference volume that I will use time and again; I am sure it will grow on me. Perhaps I should paraphrase the sub-title to “The wonderful visual guide to the diversity of life on earth.”

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to entries elsewhere in this book. The book is further enhanced by 29 superb colour photographs, 69 helpful black-and-white figures, 23 box inserts of text (up to two pages long) and one 4-page table of bird Orders and Families.

It is a sign of the times that the journals which Scott cited most often were *Nature*, *Animal Behaviour*, *Proceedings of the Royal Society: Biology*, and *Science*, with 14, 11, 10 and 10 articles cited, respectively. Of the 44 journal titles cited, only 10 were standard ornithological journals and each was cited only once or twice; Scott’s choices highlight the obvious but worrisome (to me) trend toward the ever-diminishing importance of specialized ornithological journals.

The book contains few of the editing errors inevitable in a work of this kind. The Journal volume number or the year of publication is wrong on pages 58 or 109, 83, 100, 103, and 110; *petechina* and *bee* are misspellings on pages 54 and 98, respectively; and an author’s name is spelled both correctly and incorrectly (Stark and Starck) on page 91.