

# 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.

**Editor's Note.** The address of the Birds of Northumberland County website has been changed to <http://www.willowbeachfieldnaturalists.org/Northumberland-County>. This is part of the Willow Beach Field Naturalists' website, but the URL above will take you directly to the Birds of Northumberland County. Please note that the URL is case sensitive. From Clive Goodwin.

## ZOOLOGY

### **Birds of Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan**

By Raffael Ayé, Manuel Schweizer and Tobias Roth. 2012. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540-5237 USA. 336 pages. 39.50 USD. Paper.

For many years I said I had a field guide that covered the birds everywhere in the world, but Afghanistan. Over time I replaced many of these books with better, more modern versions. Yet I never added a volume on Afghanistan. Now there is a guide to this tumultuous area. Actually it covers six "stans": Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

It follows the pattern of the string of recent excellent field guides from Princeton University Press. There are 25 modern bird guides and about 20 guides to other wildlife. This latest book is written by three (very brave?) expert ornithologists from Switzerland, and it is the first-ever field guide I have seen to this mystical area of steppe, semi-desert, and mountains. It covers 618 species, including all residents, migrants, races and vagrants, with most having a range map. (The promotional material says every species, but this is not so).

This book starts with a political map of the region followed by a geographical map and a biome map. Text and photographs give examples of the various habitats. While most of the region is rolling, dry plains and rugged, rocky mountains there is a tiny zone of subtropical forest. This allows some southern species, like drongos, White-throated Kingfisher, Oriental White-eye and Purple Sunbird to gain a toe hold in the region. There is also a small patch of boreal forest in northern Kyrgyzstan. In fact, a lot of the species listed just make it into the fringes of the area, bolstering the length of the list, but leave you wondering as to their true range. Many bird accounts end with status in the region unknown. These two points surely reflect the lower birding effort in this area. As a measure of this effort I could find six to ten times more trip reports on the Internet for popular destinations like Kenya or Peru than for Kyrgyzstan.

The book is organised in classical fashion with plates on the right pages and text with a range map on the left, with five species per page the book is not crowded and is well organized. The author's have paid particular attention in describing the key field marks. The descriptions of the difficult to separate species, like warblers, is very well done and will be useful in the field. The author's have made sure that they selected the appropriate sub-species for the region.

The range maps are well organised and useful. It is not clear to me why some species do not qualify for a range map. Red-necked Phalarope is "common and often numerous" does not have a map, yet many scarce birds (Marsh Tit, several flycatchers for example) do, with minuscule arrow pointing to one locality.

There are 13 artists and 11 of these illustrated Birds of India (Richard Grimmett and Carol and Tim Inskipp, Princeton University Press) and seven were used for Birds of East Asia (Mark Brazil, Princeton University Press). Not surprisingly some of the artwork of shared species is repeated in this book. The quality of this artwork is high and is quite consistent given the number of artists.

I have one serious issue with this guide. I cannot tell how abundant the bird is, and therefore how likely am I to see it. Selecting the Carrion Crow, surely a common bird, I see from the range map that it is widespread in the east of the region. Yet there is no mention of its abundance. At the other end of the scale the Siberian Crane is listed as very rare and does not have a range map or a note of where it is found. As the western population is this species is a few to none, I would have liked a lot more information on this bird's status. On a more practical level, if I make a summer visit to Lake Balkhash in Kazakhstan, how likely am I to see an Eastern Imperial Eagle or both Greater and Asian Short-

toed Larks. Similarly the Little (Small) Pratincole is a summer breeding bird in Afghanistan, but there is no map and no text to enlighten me.

The authors should be congratulated for an inspiring effort. They have obviously scoured the references to make the text as accurate as possible. It is clear that the region is ripe for an invasion of borders who could bol-

ster the often limited records. This book will make it easier to improve these needed inputs. So would anyone like to go on a search for an Afghan Snowfinch – in Zabul Province (next to Kandahar)?

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