

# Book Reviews

## ZOOLOGY

### The Clements Checklist of Birds of the World 6th Edition

By James F. Clements. 2007. Cornell University Press, Sage House, 512 East State Street, Ithaca, New York 14850 USA. 864 pages. U.S.\$59.95. Cloth.

If you travel outside of North America [or any other home territory] you will have to face *the* question. Is this bird species one I have seen before? There are so many look alike birds that are different species in some areas and the same species in others. You can wonder about crows, oystercatchers, stilts and the plethora of wagtails. Or is this bird with the same or a similar name to a look-alike home species, the same or a different bird. For example are Willow Grouse, Red Grouse and Willow Ptarmigan the same species? It can be really confusing.

Enter Dr. James Franklin Clements [1927-2005], an orphan who served in the U.S. merchant marine and navy before going to college. In the Korean war he was in the air force, before finally settling to get his Ph.D. in 1975. His thesis became the first edition of a check list of the world's birds. Because of ever-evolving taxonomy we are now at the 6th edition.

Clements has produced a list, simply a list, of all the known bird species and subspecies. Producing such a simple list is a very complex task indeed. It must have felt like trying to resolve the unresolvable on many occasions. So here we have this simple list and can ask how useful is it? Theoretically, I should be able to check out a bird that I am unsure about. Looking it up in Clements should allow me to clarify the bird's status and decide whether it can be added to my life list or not.

How well does this work? The first problem is you must use the same English name as Clements. Nowhere is there a list of alternative names. If you look for Melba Finch in the index you will be disappointed. You will need to use either Green-winged Pytilia or look for the genus *Pytilia*. The North American bias is shown by *Circus cyaneus* being called Northern Harrier as opposed to Hen Harrier [the older name].

Now we come to the sticky issue of splits and lumps. The North American Magpie is split from its European counterpart, as is Hooded and Carrion Crow. Clements lists the Somali Ostrich as a subspecies, *Struthio camelus molybdophanes*, whereas most recent literature gives this distinctive blue-necked bird separate species status [*Struthio molybdophanes*]. Similarly the brightly coloured barn swallow found only in the Nile delta is not split from its more common cousin. Again this

is listed by some as a separate species, Egyptian Swallow, *Hirundo savignii*. The *vegae* Herring Gull is separated as East Siberian Gull. This is open to question and recent work suggests more research is needed. Certainly I have found it difficult to see a difference in the field. Is it a little darker than a Herring or was I being deluded by poor light?

Each entry is accompanied by a description of the species range. These ranges are useful when comparing species. For example, my list for Mongolia includes Pink-footed Goose, *Anser fabalis*. The range for Pink-footed Goose in Clements does not include Mongolia, whereas the Bean Goose, correctly *Anser fabalis*, is present. Clearly this is an error in the Mongolian list, probably due to translation problems, that was quickly resolved.

However, the ranges given for other species are less useful. Clements can be forgiven for minor lapses such as the range of the Northern Wheatear or Crested Auklet – given as Siberia. The birds I saw on the eastern-most coast of Russia this year were technically in the Russian Far East – not Siberia. Siberia does not extend to the east coast. This is minor compared to Houboura and Macqueens Bustards. Clements splits these two birds and gives Macqueens a range of the Nile to .... Pakistan. *The Handbook of the Birds of the World*, Volume 3, cited as the major reference, does not split this species but lists it as a subspecies, *Chlamydotis undulata macqueenii*, and correctly gives the range as NW Kazakhstan to .... Mongolia and Northern China. Similarly Clements does not mention the range extension of Cardinal and House Finch into eastern Canada.

I have checked to see if some of the recent discoveries are included in this check list. Scarlet-banded Barbet and Long-whiskered Owlet are, but the two most recent discoveries, Large-billed Warbler [the 1867 reference is given but not the recent March 2007 capture of two birds] and Gorgeted Puffleg, [May 2007] are not.

Having one coherent checklist is extremely valuable for the travelling birder. It still does not solve all the issues with a changing taxonomy, but at least you can use it as a solid foundation for your records. You will still have to research current taxonomy and recent discoveries and decide which birds you will accept as a full species.

Incidentally, I make it a point never to directly mark books. I use post-it notes or equivalent. I will make an exception for this one book. Not only is it set up to be

ticked, but it is a good idea to add information on species as new data become available. That is until version seven is printed.

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## Birds of Europe, Russia, China and Japan: Passerines, Tyrant Flycatchers to Buntings

By Norman Arlott. 2007. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540-5237 USA. 240 pages. U.S.\$29.95. Paper.

My wife and I recently decided to visit northern China and Mongolia [the Silk Road]. This left me with a dilemma; which bird book or books would I need to take to get adequate coverage. I did not want to pay \$100 or more for a paperback copy of *A Field Guide to the Birds of China* (John MacKinnon and Karen Phillips, Oxford University Press, New York). My *Birds of Russia* (Flint et al.) gives fair coverage but the illustrations are not as precise as I would like them, particularly for warblers, etc. *Birds of China* (De Schauensee) only illustrates some of the species and gives descriptions of range only and you need a thorough knowledge of China's geography to follow these descriptions. *Birds of India* (Grimmett et al.) is a much better guide with a lot of species covered [as winter visitors], but the coverage is far to the south so the range maps are useless.

Then Princeton announced *Birds of Europe, Russia, China and Japan* and I thought it would be just right for my purposes. While the book covers only the passerines (from Tyrant Flycatchers to Buntings), it is exactly these groups for which I needed a better, more up-to-date book. The non-passerines, like ducks and gulls, tend to be more distinctive and are suitably covered in previous books.

Technically Princeton calls this book an illustrated checklist. Each species has an illustration or two with very brief facing-page text. At the back of the book are range maps. While the text presents little about each species but key features, it is perfect for the traveller. It measures only 5" × 7" × ½" [12.5 × 17.5 × 2 cm] and weighs 14 oz [100 g or around half a normal field guide].

The range maps are 2" × ¾" [5 × 2 cm] and cover from Britain to Kamchatka, from Svalbard to Northern India. As there are no country boundaries [these would make the little map too cluttered] I found it helpful to create a mask with a piece of clear plastic sheet. I traced the outline of the map in blue, then, using Google Earth as a guide [Google Earth has a similar orientation to these maps] I shaded in transparent yellow the region I plan to visit. I can now place the mask over each map and quickly see if I will be in any bird's range. This was somewhat satisfactory. I compared my list created with the mask to actual trip lists and I was in error by around 15 percent.

Although the book's title suggests it covers Europe, Russia, China and Japan, the maps go much further. For example it includes the Nile Valley Sunbird of the Middle East and the Purple Sunbird of India, as well as the geographically restricted Sinai Rosefinch and Sub-Sahara's Blandford's Lark. I am not sure of the author's rationale for including birds like the Rosy-patched Shrike, a purely African species [but I am happy he did so].

The critical illustrations are those of difficult to identify birds such as warblers and some finches. Arlott has been illustrating bird books for many years [my first Arlott book is over 40 years old]. His skill has grown dramatically and his most recent work is top quality. My copy has all the illustrated species looking a little dark. [Technically the hue is correct but the illustrations are over saturated and this is part of the printer's quality control. North American readers will see this when looking at the Cedar Waxwing and Varied Thrush illustrations. Both are way more intense than the real birds I have seen this year.] In detail though the artwork is excellent. When I looked at Arctic Warbler and try to separate it from its congener leaf warblers or the Beautiful Rosefinch from its relatives then the relevant field marks are apparent. North Americans will have no difficulty identifying wood warblers using this guide, even with the intense colours. [I was surprised to find over 40 "North American" species, such as Wood Warblers and Icterids, have been seen in this region as vagrants.]

This book solved my problem and will be ideal for other travelers to this large region. I look forward to a similar book on the non-passerines. I hope Princeton does well with their checklist series [I believe they have a dozen titles] as they are so much more convenient when luggage weight is critical.

### Literature Cited

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