

# 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 a AUD and so on. You will find these are the codes now used by financial institutions and internet currency converters. I will include an updated note for the next few issues as a reminder.

## ZOOLOGY

### **Handbook of the Birds of the World Volume 10**

By Josep del Hoyo, Andrew Elliott and David A. Christie (Editors). 2005. Lynx Edicions, Montseny, 8, 08193 Bellaterra, Barcelona, Spain. 896 pages. 205.00 Euros. Cloth.

This edition goes from Cuckoo-shrikes, Bulbuls, Leafbirds, Fairy-bluebirds, Ioras, Silky-flycatchers, Waxwings), Hypocolius, Palmchat, Dippers, Wrens, Mockingbirds and Thrashers, Accentors to Thrushes and covers a total of 723 species. Following the *Handbook of Birds of the World's* well-established format there is an introduction to each family covering systematics, morphology, habitat, behaviour, voice, food, breeding, movements, relationship with man, and status and conservation. Each species has its own account and this includes taxonomy, status and distribution, descriptive notes, habitat, food and feeding, breeding, movements, and status and conservation. This material was contributed by 16 expert authors.

The book begins with an essay on the ecology and impact of non-indigenous birds by Daniel Sol, Tim Blackburn, Phillip Cassey, Richard Duncan and Jordi Clavell. This is a well-researched article that I found fascinating to read. While it does not understate the problems I found the text factual and free of unwanted emotion. Introduced species are a serious issue and this text provides a sound perspective.

*Handbook of Birds of the World* continues to provide a chapter for each family that includes a description of the family and the systematics, morphology, habitat, general habits, voice, food and feeding, breeding, movements, relationship with humans, status and conservation. All of this is provided in clear, logical format with first-rate illustrations to complement the text. The cuckoo-shrike family varies from the predominantly grey cuckoo-shrikes to the bright red minivets. I found this book useful in verifying the differences between the Small Minivet and the Scarlet Minivet. The bulbuls are a widespread family of 138 species confined to the Old World. Some, like the Red-vented Bulbul are common, noisy and abundant. Others are more restricted, like the golden yellow Andaman Bulbul which is confined to two small islands in the Indian Ocean. The leafbirds are a small family bright green, look-alike little birds, often accented by blue or yellow. The wrens

are a very widespread family. Despite most of them being variations on brown, black, and white, many are strikingly different in plumage. Even more varied are their habits and songs. The information available on these shy sprites is often sparse [the Tooth-billed Wren has scarcely two dozen lines of text], while the familiar Northern [Winter] Wren has well over a full page, including 44 described subspecies! This allows us to compare the European Jenny Wren with our Winter Wren [and indeed the east and west coast Canadian birds].

The Mimids [Mockingbirds, catbirds and thrashers] are confined to the Americas although some are restricted to single islands. The book ends with the thrushes, a huge family of 336 species, spread from the far north of Greenland to Tasmania. About half are typical thrushes like the American Robin; another group is the chats like the Eurasian Robin. This family has some of the best-loved birds with their gentle round heads and eyes and confiding nature. One of the most handsome is the Varied Thrush as admirably depicted by the photo on page 521. Similarly the photo of the European Robin landing on a frost-rimed tree is superb. But the most spectacular photo is a group of five thrushes [Blackbird, Redwing, Mistle Thrush, Fieldfare and Song Thrush] in a neat circle feeding on an apple in the snow. The photo I like the best, however, is the European Robin and the gardener, as it reminds me of my childhood helping my father in our vegetable plot.

Some notable changes are the split of Black-capped, Flame-throated and Black-crested Bulbul, Common and Indian Blackbird, Dusky and Naumann's Thrushes, Rufous-throated and Black-throated Thrushes, Red-tailed Wheatear into Chestnut-rumped Wheatear and Rusty-tailed Wheatear. [Red-rumped Wheatear is renamed Buff-rumped Wheatear]. Some notable non-changes are Common Stonechat [a few possible splits], Mourning Wheatear and Arabian Wheatear and Common Scaly (or White's) Thrush and Amami Thrush, which remain lumped.

A few of the illustrations are a bit over-saturated. This is most evident in the Cedar Waxwing. This bird has a delicate and elegant colour scheme and is not as

bold as shown. The American bluebirds are a trifle too intense as are a few others, but most plates are accurate and certainly none would hinder identification.

*Handbook of Birds of the World 10* adds another block of useful information to the world's ornithological literature for some of the world's most well known and loved birds. It is presented as readable text with

accurate and beautiful illustrations, complemented by excellent photographs. This is a mine of quality material that will be useful to many, especially the travelling birder – to be left at home as it is too large to pack.

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## Handbook of the Birds of the World Volume 12

*Edited by Josep del Hoyo, Andrew Elliott and David A. Christie.* 2006. Lynx Edicions, Montseny, 8, 08193 Bellaterra, Barcelona, Spain. 800 pages. 205 Euros. Cloth.

Kevin J. Caley is not a name that leaps into my mind when I think of paleontologists. He is the author of the foreword on fossil birds in this, the latest volume of *Handbook of Birds of the World*. He is an evolutionary biologist at the University of Nottingham, teaching various biodiversity-related subjects with a special interest in bird evolution and diversity. It was refreshing to read an article about the smaller dinosaurs and proto-birds rather than the giant flesh eaters. Caley has written and illustrated a comprehensive summary of the fossil record, covering 200 000 mya [million years ago] to 3000 mya. His illustrations are very helpful in following the evolution of species [although I question his relative size of his bald *Velociraptor* – about 7 m [43 ft.] compared to his *Tyrannosaurus*. This owes more to the film “Jurassic Park” than reality. [*Velociraptor* was turkey-sized 2 m and feathered]. The author includes a map of all major fossil sites [not bird fossil sites]. Both Alberta and Mongolia are missing. Similarly paleontologists like Phil Currie, Dale Russell, and Dong Zhiming are missing from his references.

This edition goes from Picathartes to Tits and Chickadees and includes Babblers, Parrotbills, Australasian Babblers, Logrunners, Jewel-babblers, Whistlers, Australasian Robins, Fairywrens, Bristlebirds, Thornbills, Australian Chats, Sittellas and Australasian Treecreepers. It covers a total of 638 species, a large proportion of which are Australasian. As in previous volumes, there is an introduction to each family covering systematics, morphology, habitat, behavior, voice, food, breeding, movements, relationship with man, and status and conservation. Each species account includes all the pertinent information about the biology of the bird. I checked through a host of species and found the taxonomic status is current, even if I get confused by the constant changes. I find it hard to reconcile the 59 subspecies of the Golden Whistler with the less-variable Blue Tit that has been split from the Canary Blue Tit. I also believe the distributions are accurate and the illustrations are correct. They cover every species and the more distinctive subspecies. I particularly noted how precise the Tawny-bellied Babbler – a recent life bird – illustration represented the birds I saw.

Considering there are 12 ornithologists who contributed to this volume, the quality of the accounts is both high and even. This is a credit to both the authors and editors and speaks volumes about their editorial discipline. There are 400 colour photographs, which range from good to spectacular. Again this is a reflection of the professional work done by the editors. For me, several photographs have a special appeal. The photograph of Great Tits [page 669] on a branch with catkins is given extra charm by the close match of the catkin colour to the yellow breasts of the birds. The photo of the Red-tailed Laughing Thrush [page 97] is not only a superb photo, but the birds themselves are very vibrant. Several other photographs also caught my attention [Splendid Fairy Wren [page 503], Varied Sittella [page 639], and Crested Tit [page 666]. The one that really grabbed me, though, is the photo of a Black-capped Chickadee hovering below a long icicle drinking. It took me a few moments to realise just what I was looking at, but when I clued in I was stunned.

I often wonder how prohibitive the cost of 205 Euros [about \$300 CAD] for each volume and about 2000 euros [almost \$3000 CAD] if you buy all 12 volumes. Remember there are more to come. For this money you could purchase 60 to 100 books on individual families. You would need to buy that many books to reference all of the families covered to date. For non-academic readers, the price of a volume may appear steep. However, it is reasonable when compared to the large number of other books you would have to buy to get the same coverage.

I have heard criticism about the brevity of the index – 17 pages for a book of 798 pages or 2%. I do not consider this out of line with similar books. While this might be an issue for academic researchers and possibly graduate students, for most of us the index is fine. While it is not detailed on technical terms, it does list all the species. I do not look for explanations of neontology [I would choose a more appropriate text]. I do expect to find the current known range of the Southern Emu-wren – and this index works well.

So once again Lynx have provided an impressive resource which will allow the enthusiast to go back frequently for much needed information on species splits and distribution.

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