

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 East Asia – China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan and Russia

By M. Brazil. 2009. Helm Field Guides, A & C Black Publishers Limited, 38 Soho Square, London U.K. W1D 3HB. 528 pages. 29.99 GBP, Paper.

This book is a milestone field guide publication as it fills a major gap and will be highly appreciated by naturalists, birders, and researchers alike in the Pacific Rim (eastern Russia, Japan, China, Taiwan, the Koreas and Pacific Islands) and beyond. The North American audience will also highly appreciate this book (e.g., for Alaska, Hawaii, Guam and British Columbia) because it presents for the first time a thorough description, reference, and guide for the Far East Asian bird species which occur every year “on the other side”. For people working in the Far East, this is a long-awaited high-quality publication of 515 pages with 11 sections to be used for your daily work in the field (the book is rather compact, resists water and is quite easy to handle in one hand). Further, it will change how you do science there, and trigger reporting of species and new research for better ornithology overall.

The 236 color plates (coherently done by a list of 13 world-class illustrators: 130 non-passerine and 135 passerine plates with birds in typical postures, sometimes with their typical habitats) are a true delight and make for extremely useful support of the identification section; so do the maps (showing colors for Summer range, Resident, On migration, Winter range and Scarce). I appreciate the crisp but precise text on identification, status and distribution, habitat and habits, “bare parts” (bill shape, size and coloration, eye color, legs), voice, moult, as well as subspecies, morph, sex and age details. The geographic scope, taxonomy, nomenclature, bird habitats, migration, vagrancy, and “how to use this book” all get briefly introduced. All relevant components for a guide book are included; e.g., Avian Topography and Terminology, a Key to 92 Families, References (half a page, but extensive glossary and bibliography sections are available online at <http://sites.google.com/site/birdsofeastasia>), an Index (14 pages), and also a rather helpful one page Quick Index at the very end. The reader will further appreciate the Appendices on Status (by Country) and Potential Vagrants (perhaps a little short for such a huge region covering only 46 species). Plate 236 on “Extinct or Presumed Extinct Species” might be rather conser-

vative, as it covers only Spectacled Cormorant, Crested Shelduck, Eskimo Curlew, Bonin Woodpecker, Ryukyu Woodpecker, Miyako Kingfisher, Kittlitz's Thrush, and Bonin Grosbeak.

This book stands out in time and in ornithology beyond Asia! The sophisticated field guide covers 985 species which make up about $\frac{1}{10}$ th of the global avian diversity. Its impact will generate better reporting of species and their ranges and occurrences in the wider Pacific region; e.g., for the high regional species diversity of “swans, geese and ducks”, “buzzards, eagles, vultures and allies”, “sandpipers, woodcock and snipe”, “gulls and terns”, “old world warblers”, and “chats, robins and flycatchers”. Rare Bird enthusiasts will have a feast here beyond warblers and buntings. This book shows that the Russian Far East and pelagic waters are still widely under-birded. The author (who has already achieved major publications with his rather impressive earlier work on Whooper Swans, the Birds of Japan and Birding in Japan) must be highly congratulated for this life-time publication, bringing biodiversity-related progress to Asia and the Pacific Rim as a whole.

I would only criticize four things in this book: (a) the maps could be a little bigger, (b) the book lacks any relevant sections on conservation and climate change (both show big impacts already, as can be seen by anybody working in the field), (c) the taxonomy and nomenclature do not follow ITIS but are a self-designed mix of references by the author based on Dickinson (2003) (which has value in itself though, because Brazil is an expert on these species overall), and (d) local Russian experts for this region should have been more involved (at least four experts were not involved at all, nor even mentioned). Species names could perhaps have been presented in Japanese, Mandarin, Korean and Russian? This book celebrates a globally well-established, white race (English) “Old Boys” birding network, a thing we ought to overcome, certainly for Asia. From my own work, I found small errors in some of the Russian species distribution maps. In times of digi birding and a wider Asian obsession with techno gimmicks, the publisher could have been

more supportive of such endeavors (as they help to document species, makes for a better identification, and immediate publication of sightings online).

Anyways, this book is the best field guide for its region and beyond, and leaves a global impact. It's to be placed in your bookshelf and used in the field a lot

for the challenges to come in times of globalization and massive Asian Growth!

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Birds of East Asia – China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan and Russia

By M. Brazil. 2009. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey. 528 pages. 39.95 USD, Paper.

This book is a great contribution to the literature of a poorly covered region. It does, however raise some curious questions. The first is the area covered; it ranges from 116°E [just east of Hong Kong] to 165°E [the date line], from 20°N [Taiwan] to 78° N [about level with Grise Fiord]. About 80 per cent of the region selected is in Russia – Siberia and the Russian Far East. This leaves out most of China, but includes all of Taiwan, Korea, Japan [plus a smidgen of Mongolia]. It seems an odd choice to select portions of countries. It does mean that many North American birds are included; those that sneak their range from Alaska into the Russian Far East.

The format is typical of modern field guides; illustrations on the right and text on the left. Range maps are included with the text. In addition to the usual colour representations for summer, winter and permanent ranges, the author has added a pink zone for “scarce”, but scarce is not defined. True vagrants like North American warblers have no map only a range description and rare birds like Siberian Crane [critically endangered – population around 3200.] have regularly coloured maps. Instead scarce is used for birds like the Common Starling which strays to the Chinese coast in winter in small numbers. Despite my confusion this is a useful concept that should be copied by others.

Because of the book's chosen regional boundary, the reader can see 985 species with Great Blue Heron [accidental] and Grey Heron on the same page – a useful juxtaposition. Similarly Redhead, Canvasback and Common and Red-crested Pochard are all on one page. The book includes the Bering Sea alcids and around 30 buntings, some like Yellowhammer as vagrants and eight North American sparrows, again as vagrants [except Savannah Sparrow]. Thirty one gulls are depicted, of which 11 are vagrants, giving a wide coverage in a single book. Travellers will recognise birds from Europe, India, Polynesia, North America, Africa and even Antarctica.

The text, while brief, is clear and makes all the salient points. This includes discussions on the subspecies, especially where there is the likelihood of a split in the future [e.g., Eurasian Blackbird]. However, the author makes some odd statements. For example, under Great Blue Heron it says “some migrating as far as Canada to breed” – does he not know it is common

in much of our country? The voice of the Rusty Black-bird is given as a soft “chuck” not the classic “squeal like the creak of rusty hinges.” Only the calls, not the songs, of the North American warblers are given [which is probably valid for this region]. The Reed Parrotbill is shown as restricted to Eastern China. There is a question mark in Russia, but the bird does occur at Russia's Lake Khanka [north of Vladivostok]. The Cackling Goose (*Branta hutchinsii*), is incorrectly called a Lesser Canada Goose and Cackling Goose is identified as *B. h. minima* [correctly it is the Small Cackling Goose, one of the five subspecies of Cackling Goose]. *Branta canadensis* is called the Greater Canada Goose, but of the seven subspecies none are called Greater. Lesser Canada Goose properly denotes the subspecies *parvipes* of the Canada Goose. Recent DNA studies suggest that the Black-eared Kite (*M. m. lineatus*), here separated as *M. lineatus*, is not sufficiently distinctive to be called a separate species. The author includes the Tropical shearwater as a full species. *Puffinus bailloni*, but does not mention Audubon's Shearwater, *Puffinus ilherminieri*. This muddies an already confusing taxonomy. The current status is that the subspecies *Puffinus ilherminieri bailloni* breeds in the Indian Ocean. The subspecies *Puffinus ilherminieri dichrous* in central Polynesia and the Indian Ocean up, while *Puffinus ilherminieri bannermani* breeds on the Ogasawara Islands.

The Eurasian common names are used [diver instead of loon etc.] although some of are a little out of line. For example, Bearded Reedling is listed as Bearded Tit [having been re-displaced from the parrotbills, but not back into the tits.] *Aegyptius monachus* is called the Monk Vulture [a valid but obscure name] rather than Cinerous or Eurasian Black Vulture.

The illustrations have been done by 13 artists so there are some style differences. The quality, however, is consistent and the reader will have no difficulty in the field. Birds like the Greenish Warbler are as good as they can be with such difficult species. Try putting Greenish Warbler in Google Images and comparing the photos with the illustrations. There are birds that are browner, with more or less prominent wing and eye stripes establishing how difficult it is to depict *Phylloscopus* warblers such as this one. The same can be said of the *Gallinago* snipes. The one place I did blink was the depiction of the 43 cm Little Bustard