

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 Brazil

By Ber van Perlo. 2009. University of Oxford Press, 198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016 USA. 465 pages, 150.00 Cloth and 39.95 USD Paper.

Finally we have a good modern field guide to the birds of Brazil. [This means someone need write only a modern field guide for Afghanistan to get full world coverage.]. Most of us have struggled with inadequate guides or having to leave large tomes at home. Now we have a real field book—hallelujah!

So how good is this book? It includes all of Brazil and covers more than 1800 species. These are depicted on 187 colour plates, meaning there are about 10 species per plate. As the page is 9.5 by 6.5 inches, you might expect these plates to look crowded. Most do not, because the illustrations are small and there is a lot white [wasted?] space. With a little work, many of these paintings could have been 20 per cent larger without enlarging the book. Some of the hawk pages [with sex, age, and morph plumages] are, however, cramped. The species sequence does not follow current taxonomy—thank goodness—but instead uses a logical sequence for convenience in the field.

The author, Ber van Perlo, is also the illustrator. He says he has tried to capture a bird's "jizz", but I find many of his illustrations wooden. The albatrosses, for example, lack the slender grace that separates them from other seabirds. The illustrations do improve as you progress through the book, so I found the passerines to be more lifelike. Beware of some copies that are missing yellow on some plates. Check the Green Kingfisher and ensure it is not blue but green. I could not find any evidence of this in my copy, although I did scrutinise the Palm Tanager, as it was grey and showed hardly any yellow-olive tones. All the other birds on this plate were correctly coloured, however. Not all the birds are drawn to the same scale. For example, the 24 inch Hoatzin is shown the same size as the 10 inch Barred Tinamou. This is a concern only where birds of greatly different size are on the same page. So, while these illustrations are not as good as in most other field guides, I believe they are good enough

for most identifications. I do wonder how well you can use this book for the like of the elanias and tyrannulets with flitting birds under field conditions.

The distribution maps show the range for each species as well as seasonality and occurrence. In all, there are 1791 distribution maps, as some introduced species [chicken and guinea fowl] are not included. Personally I find such maps most useful, particularly as they show seasonal changes. This author also adds little red dots for six key cities, giving the visitor some practical reference points.

The introductory material describes Brazil's biogeography, climate, geomorphology, and native vegetation. While brief, this includes some important information, in particular, on five critical plant species. There is an English-Portuguese dictionary of useful terms [all the species names are given in English and Portuguese]. An appendix lists all the numerous endemics.

The text is cryptic, precise, and I thought was fairly useful. For some of the difficult species there might not be enough detail for conclusive identification. The author includes descriptions of calls in terms that generally made sense to me. A good example is the call of the Screaming Piha—a bird that is common, noisy, and is often in the background of South American films.

This guide is far too large for the typical pocket, but it would be fine for a back-pack. Although I was somewhat disappointed in the quality, I am still delighted finally to get a useful, modern field guide, and it is a giant leap forward. I am puzzled by the price of this book. Depending on the agent, the price for the paperback is 40 USD give or take a few dollars, yet the hard copy is around 150 USD. Similar books do not have such a large difference between the cloth and paper editions.

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