

## Handbook of Birds of the World. Volume 14: Bush Shrikes to Old World Sparrows

Edited by Josep del Hoyo, Andrew Elliott, and David Christie. Lynx Edicions, Montseny, 8, 08193 Bellaterra, Barcelona, Spain. 896 pages, 335 CAD Cloth.

I normally jump to the species plates and descriptions, but this time I stopped at the foreword. This essay on birding is dedicated to Max Nicholson, the man who took us from bird collecting to bird watching. Nicholson was also instrumental in the creation and growth of many initiatives like the British Trust for Ornithology, the World Wildlife Fund, and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. The essay "Birding Past, Present and Future: a Global View" by Stephen Moss is an overview history of birdwatching from the pre-binocular era to the present. It gives a fascinating look at our cherished hobby [or is that religion?] using a broad frame of reference. For me, this was an emotional journey, as so much of the text reflected my own past. Moss notes that gasoline rationing ended in 1950 in the UK, making birding travel easier; I got my first bird book that year too. He notes the surge in numbers of birders "from the 1960s onwards"; I joined my first bird club in 1961. He points out the impact of global air travel; I have now birded in 40 countries. Moss explains the change in optics to roof-prism binoculars in the 1970s; I bought my first pair in 1972. The author references the key figures of the last 50 years—Fisher, Peterson, Keith, Snetsinger, and so on—people I have admired.

This volume of the *Handbook of Birds of the World* covers 485 species, including bush-shrikes, helmet-shrikes, vangas, drongos, New Zealand wattlebirds, stitchbird, mudlarks, Australian mudnesters, woodswallows, butcherbirds, bristlehead, bowerbirds, birds-of-paradise, crows, oxpeckers, starlings, and Old World sparrows. Five of these families are large and significant.

The bush-shrikes are a largely African, largely colourful group of heavy, hook-billed passerines. I still recall the pleasure I got from seeing my first Crimson-breasted Shrike, rivalling the nearby Giraffe, also my first. I hope to see more of these species this summer in Namibia and South Africa, home of a quarter of the species.

The birds-of-paradise consist of 42 of the most exotically plumaged birds on Earth. The story of their discovery by Westerners is bizarre and magical. Even today, seeing these birds is difficult and one of the rarest treats in ornithology. They were one of the earliest inspirations for a young David Attenborough. *The Handbook of Birds of the World* artists have done a very fine job of capturing the magnificence of the plumage of these wonderful beasts. So, hats off to *Handbook of Birds of the World* for an excellent job on an impossible task. Yet they still missed something,

I think, as they have shown these birds sitting on a branch [a logical choice] and have foregone the magic of their display. There are wonderful photographs of birds in display, but you really need to be there or at least watch a video to see these spectacles in their true, shimmering glory. There are about 80 photos of birds-of-paradise, 40% of which were contributed by two men, Tim Lehman and Brian Coates. These photos show almost 90% of the species.

The second family is the crows. These birds are easier to depict, as many are black, sometimes with white or grey, although the jays can be remarkably colourful. The real marvel of crows is not their plumage, but their intelligence. I was not surprised to read that the American Crow has the largest brain in relation to body size of any bird. I have always had a great fondness for crows, as they normally give a good performance. Like teenage boys, they are usually up to something. New World warblers may be more showy but all they do is eat and sing. Yet Carrion Crows stand with humans at crosswalks so they can place nuts on the road when traffic is halted. After the nuts are crushed, the crows follow the pedestrians and collect their meal. Other crows have been seen making tools.

For all my life, I have only lived in the range of the European Starling [*Sturnus vulgaris*], so I am prejudiced by constant contact with a dull, noisy and trouble-causing bird. In my travels, however, I have seen some stunningly striking starlings. What could be more brilliant than the aptly named Superb Starling, captured nicely in this volume of *Handbook of Birds of the World* by the artist and photographer. This group also includes the troublesome but entertaining mynahs.

The last group is the Old World sparrows, containing the famous, or infamous, House Sparrow. The range for this species is given as the "real", original range. Only in the text does it say that it is introduced in South Africa, the Americas and Australia. Even this is weak, as it occurs in southern Africa south of Zambia and all the Americas, except the dense rain forest. The same is true for the Common Myna and the Common (European) Starling.

Again the *Handbook* gives a broader perspective of the Old World sparrows beyond the ubiquitous House Sparrow. Although most bear a fair resemblance to this species, there are two bright yellow and one chestnut sparrow in the family.

Technically this volume is carefully researched and accurate. The only entry that confuses me is the inclusion of the Arabian Magpie [*Pica (p.?) asirensis*] as a full species, while not giving the Korean Magpie

[*Pica sericea*] species status. The last paper I read had DNA evidence supporting four species—European Magpie (*Pica pica*), Yellow-billed Magpie (*Pica nuttalli*), Black-billed Magpie (*Pica hudsonia*), and the Korean Magpie.

With the publication of this volume of the *Handbook*, the editors need only to maintain their amazing standard for two more volumes, due by 2011.

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## Corvus: A Life with Birds

By Esther Woolfson. 2008. Granta Publications, 12 Addison Avenue, London W11 UK. 337 pages, 17.95 CAD Paper.

In the British countryside, rooks are renowned for their intelligence. They are a member of the corvid family, smaller than crows, and are colonial nesters. Some rookeries have been in existence for centuries, each generation repairing and improving the winter damage, spending the summer raiding crops and outwitting all efforts by farmers to keep them away.

*Corvus* is not just an account of the life of a rook Woolfson took into her home in Aberdeen. The first chapters of the book describe her other avian lodgers—an irascible cockatiel and a depressive parrot, and, in the garden, a dovecot full of doves. Her relationships with the birds are never anthropomorphic. But it is “Chicken”, the rook, who is the star of the household with her intelligent problem-solving and interaction with people. Chicken had free run of the house, but her clipped wings were no impediment. She climbed stairs, sat on chairs, and perched on the top of cupboards. With the cupboard door ajar, she would set a booby trap: she would balance a pencil across the opening and, when the door was shut, the pencil landed on a human head. There were delighted cries from the trickster. Woolfson has read extensively both in the scientific journals and accounts in literature, so her speculations on bird brain capability ring true.

Among birds, the members of the corvid family have the largest brains in relation to body size. They

will use tools to obtain food, and they can recognize themselves in a mirror. “Self-recognition” is rare in animals and only dolphins, elephants, apes, and humans have the capacity to do so. Woolfson is careful always to question her conclusions about bird intelligence, but the evidence makes one wonder what other word can explain some of the incidents described. There are episodes of (in human terms, for lack of an alternative) anger, frustration, fear, anxiety, pleasure in greeting, regret at parting. Single words are clearly understood by the rook, and she in turn has a range of calls in reaction to events. Her memory was impressive. An interesting behaviour is her reaction to different music composers. Benjamin Britten’s music always caused a dramatic exit from the room with loud squawks; Schubert and Bach seemed to soothe. The latter part of the book discusses the intelligence and behaviour of birds, the depth of their emotional responses, and the degree to which these may be the result of problem solving by the brain as opposed to intuitive or innate solutions. The quality of the writing is exceptional and at times poetic. This was a pleasure to read. The revelations are fascinating.

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## The Curse of the Labrador Duck

By Glen Chilton. 2009. Harper Collins, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. 288 pages, 29.99 CAD Paper.

This is a bizarre, irreverent, idiosyncratic, but entertaining travelogue. Glen Chilton’s travels come close to rivaling those of fanatical birders such as Phoebe Snetsinger and Richard Koeppl, birders who have written about the nearly 8500 and 7080 bird species they encountered, respectively, in expensive worldwide trips. Like them, Glen Chilton travelled extensively. Unlike them, he wasn’t looking for live birds. He flew 72 000 miles, went 5461 miles on trains, 1168 miles on buses, and 3466 miles in automobiles, all to view *dead ducks*. He visited 55 specimens of one extinct species, the Labrador Duck, last seen alive about 1875. He also visited the most plausible Labrador Duck nesting site, identified as such by John James Audubon on 28 July 1833, at Blanc Sablon, Labrador.

Prior to writing *The Curse of the Labrador Duck*, Chilton was first author of the species accounts for the White-crowned Sparrow (1995) and Labrador Duck (1997) in the landmark *Birds of North America* series.

This book is an entirely different kind of birding book. Chilton’s pursuit of Labrador Duck specimens follows the pattern of a detective story, though a detective story told with charm and full of humour. Truth about the Labrador Duck *is* stranger than fiction, as he tells us about museum goals and procedures and we meet the dedicated collection curators. Some of the latter were extremely cooperative; others he describes as “grumpy.”