

Book Reviews

Handbook of the Birds of the World. Volume 5: Barn-owls to Hummingbirds. 1999. Edited by Josep del Hoyo, Andrew Elliott and Jordi Sargatal. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain. Hardcover, 759 pages. \$185 U.S. (ISBN 84-87334-25-3).

Once in a while, one comes across a publication that simply leaves one breathless and incredulous, due to its appearance, content, readability and functionality. I was fortunate enough, recently, to have such an experience, whereby the fifth volume of the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* series was offered to me with a request to do a review. This is not just a field guide to the birds, but rather a compilation that covers many of the essential components of their lives and their interactions with humans. The book is not only eye-pleasing, but its fact-filled pages will make it hard to put down. It has 759 pages, which in itself represents a major undertaking. The book is significantly enhanced by its 12" x 10" size, which makes it all the more impressive, while permitting the inclusion of much more information.

This ambitious project was undertaken approximately seven years ago and has involved an expert team of editors, an Editorial Council and, in the case of Volume

5, 38 world famous experts who authored individual species accounts. Volumes 1 through 4 covered the Ostrich to Ducks, New World Vultures to Guinea fowl, Hoatzin to Auks and Sandgrouse to Cuckoos, thereby setting the framework for this volume. Perhaps it is even better than its predecessors, if that is possible!

The book begins with a foreword and introduction dissimilar to any I have seen for some time. Included therein are the usual thank-yous and acknowledgements. However, also to be found are informative mini-articles on risk indicators, population size and fragmentation considerations, ecological insights in the sense that the choices made by species will affect their ability to survive in the modern world, and finally, a fascinating presentation on a system for status assessment. The IUCN-World Conservation Union developed a system in the early 1990s to evaluate the probability of a taxon becoming extinct. Frightening as this concept is, that is the fate of today's wildlife and it is good that someone is doing qualitative and quantitative assessments of risk so that we can better anticipate problems and deal with them proactively where possible. All this information was presented in the first 32 pages of the book; there are still 727

pages to go!

The rest of the book offers a detailed compilation of information related to every species of barn-owl, typical owl, oilbird, owlet-nightjar, frogmouth, potoo, nightjar, swift, tree-swift and hummingbird. The section dealing with each family begins with several pages of text, liberally interspersed with numerous high quality photographs of the species discussed. These articles are not placed herein merely as fillers. Rather, they provide concise, informative, detailed and relevant information about the families. For example, the section on typical owls is 75 pages long and discusses the following topics: systematics, morphology, habitat, general habits, voice, food and feeding, breeding, movements, relationship with man, status and conservation and a general bibliography, all highlighted with 110 spectacular colour photographs! The authors have not focussed on the larger families in their treatments, but have afforded all families a similar level of coverage. For example, the Oilbirds, which are represented by a single species, have seven pages of text and four photographs dedicated to them. Likewise, the Frogmouths, with twelve species, are covered by fifteen pages of text and nineteen photographs! These accounts are fact-filled and absorbing.

Following these introductory sections, individual species accounts for every known species, including

potentially extinct species, are presented. These accounts carry enough detail that the reader leaves feeling that he/she actually knows something about the species beyond just its field marks. Each species account includes information on its taxonomy, distribution (supplemented with an excellent range map), description, voice, habitat, food and feeding, breeding, movements, status and conservation, and a specific bibliography. The colour plates produced to support the information in the text are again of superior quality and detail. Wherever possible, the most similar members of the tribe or genus are depicted on the same plate. In keeping with the modern ideal, with respect to field guides, several views of the birds are shown on each plate. For example, the plate on *Discosura* hummingbirds depicts nine species of hummingbirds, but shows twenty-eight individual views of males, females and certain subspecies. In fact, when it is all added together, approximately 1,600 paintings and four hundred photographs supplement the 747 species accounts.

It is difficult to find fault with the book. In its entirety, it is well presented, detailed, inclusive and informative. However, I wonder why none of the colour plates shows juvenal or immature plumages. For some of the species depicted, this book will represent the only reference many birders own and as such, representations of

the young birds would have been beneficial. Additionally, there appears to be little information on extralimital sightings of birds, such as the Great Gray Owl winter invasions. In this regard, the authors acknowledge the movements, but are not very accurate with respect to the extent and range covered. However, this is not too surprising, in that so many species are covered in the book and one cannot expect it to include everything known about a species. Enough accurate information is available to ensure that the reader has a good foundation in fact when researching the species. I checked a couple of the accounts for species that I am very familiar with and was very pleased to see the accuracy and scope of the species reports. I was also pleased to see Canadian content, both in the map references, the text and the citations. The book is extremely current and includes not only much of the most recent information on all known species but also up to date information on new species recently discovered or split from

other species.

The book includes approximately 8,400 references. Included in these are two by R.R. Sargent from the early 1990s. However, his most recent work (1999) was not cited, yet this is perhaps one of his most important publications, in which he describes movements of western species of hummingbirds into the southeastern USA in winter in unprecedented numbers and locations. However, considering the number of citations included, is it really very surprising that many would be missed? But one must wonder why some breeding bird atlases were included (e.g., Britain and Ireland), while others (e.g., Ontario) were missed. These publications are invaluable, fact-filled sources of information that should not be overlooked.

All said and done, this remains one of the most amazing books that I have had the pleasure to study and it should be included in every serious birder's library! It may be ordered by e-mail: <lynx@hbw.com>.

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