

Book Review

The Handbook of Bird Identification for Europe and the Western Palearctic. 1998. By *Mark Beaman and Steve Madge*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. Hardcover, 784 pages. \$99.50 U.S.

This long-awaited handbook is of interest to North American birders. It treats nearly 900 species, almost one-tenth of the world's birds. It is a comprehensive textbook concentrating on identification, not a field guide! The area covered includes all of Europe, North Africa to the central Sahara, and the Middle East to the border of Iran.

The extensive introduction discusses identification, bird topography, molt and plumage terminology, feather wear, soft parts, etc. The characters of each bird family are described before the species accounts. The species accounts are detailed, describing the field marks of most plumage stages, similar species, sex and age characters, voice, subspecies, status and habitat, and include 625 range maps in colour.

The colour plates by six artists number an amazing 357 full pages, plus many more birds illustrated in colour spread throughout the text. Each plate depicts two or three species with about 15 illustrations per plate showing males and females in various plumages,

including fresh and worn individuals, subspecies, morphs and variants. Many species also are illustrated in flight, such as gulls, shorebirds, hawks, waterfowl and some passerines. The illustrations generally are excellent and precise. For example, on the folded wings of many passerines, you can see the median coverts are overlapping from the outside inward toward the body, and the next row of greater coverts is overlapping in the opposite direction. It is like having the birds in the hand!

A tradition in bird book reviews is to point out errors and omissions. It is a credit to the authors, artists and publishers that there are very few mistakes in this handbook. However, the illustration of the male "Cory's" Least Bittern (dark morph) on page 98 is unlike any of the specimens in the Royal Ontario Museum. Interestingly, *The Birds of the Western Palearctic* (BWP) illustrates a very similar "Cory's" as number 4 on plate 30 in Volume 1 (Cramp 1977). Perhaps it was the source of the error here, or the same specimen from a British museum was used in both cases. In 1996, Peter Burke and I pointed out in *Ontario Birds* 14(1): 26-40 that the illustration in BWP is "definitely not a Cory's or even a typical Least Bittern". The same comment applies to the illustration in this handbook. If the illustrations in this handbook and the

BWP are based on the same specimens in a British museum, then that specimen should be re-evaluated. The illustrations of the male Cory's in both books should be almost black above, and a much richer dark chestnut below, and even the bill is darker on Cory's.

This handbook is packed full of identification information. The

illustrations are outstanding. I highly recommend this book to birders and ornithologists.

It is available in Ontario from Open Air Books & Maps in Toronto at 416-363-0719, or in the U.S. from ABA Sales toll free at 800-634-7736, or from Buteo Books toll free at 800-722-2460. Have your credit card ready.

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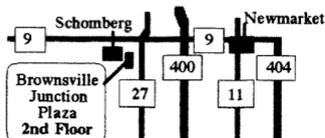
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