

## Book Reviews

***Kingfishers, Bee-eaters, and Rollers: A Handbook.*** 1992. By C. Hilary Fry and Kathie Fry, illustrated by Alan Harris. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. Hardcover, 324 pages, 40 coloured plates plus line drawings and 114 range maps. \$49.50 U.S.

This book is another in the Identification Guide Series of comprehensive monographs including *Seabirds, Shorebirds, Waterfowl, Swallows and Martins, Finches and Sparrows*, and *Warblers* published variously by Princeton University Press and Houghton Mifflin. The present volume covers the world's 12 rollers (Coraciidae), 24 bee-eaters (Meropidae), and 87 kingfishers. The latter, following Sibley and Ahlquist, are considered here to be comprised of three separate families: the Dacelonidae (56 species of kookaburras and halcyon kingfishers centred in Australasia and the far east), the Alcedinidae (22 small blue and rufous species mainly found in the African and Oriental tropics), and the Cerylidae (the 9-member, largely American green and giant kingfisher group which includes our Belted Kingfisher).

The book begins with a concise overview of current ideas on the taxonomic status of the five families plus that of the remaining, otherwise untreated groups (motmots, todies, ground-rollers, and Cuckoo-roller) in the order Coraciiformes. Succeeding chapters deal with the food and foraging of kingfishers, bee-eaters, and rollers, their nesting, social and breeding behaviour, their distribution and derivation, and a short section on the precarious status of several island rarities. The treatments are

authoritative - which is to be expected since Hilary Fry has been publishing on all three groups since the 1960s - and pleasingly well written. The authors draw on the works of others whenever appropriate (particularly a huge, privately published monograph on kingfishers by J. Forshaw) but their vast personal experience with these birds is also captivatingly evident throughout these overviews.

The same flavour is carried over into the individual species accounts. Each bird is usually discussed under the general headings of *Field Identification, Voice, Geographical Variation, Habitat and Range, Food, Habits* (including *Nesting and Laying Months*), *Description*, and *References* but Fry and Fry don't hesitate to expand their treatments when they see fit to include extra knowledge, special insights, interesting anecdotes, or unanswered questions about a particular species.

The species accounts are enhanced here and there with line drawings that illustrate various displays, postures or fine points of identification but it is the coloured plates near the front of the book that make the greatest visual impact.

Here, on page after page, are illustrated some of the world's most stunning birds (the Carmine Bee-eater gets my vote as the most beautiful bird on Earth). Since your

reviewer has seen only two rollers, two bee-eaters and seven kingfishers - and most of them longer ago than he cares to tell you - I am hardly qualified to comment on the fidelity of Alan Harris' paintings. The ones I know are very good but all I can say about the others is that, to me, they look like convincingly real, live birds and are truly beautiful. All 123 species are shown in this book but so many well-marked subspecies are also illustrated that the 40 plates include no fewer than 350 different portraits. The Mangrove Kingfisher alone is given 17 different treatments in an attempt to capture the range of plumages exhibited by the 50 (!) different races of this one species.

This last example may be the most extreme case of island to island variation shown in this book but it is far from the only one. Indeed, I found that Harris' depiction of so many races, not to mention of so many other similar forms now judged to be full species, was as fine an illustration as one could ever hope to see of the power of geographic isolation to produce new forms of life.

The same wealth of illustrations also leads, however, to the one criticism I have of this book and of this series. Someone decided that, rather than identifying each bird right beside its image, it would somehow be better to put a number and letter combination there instead. The reader can then look for the same number above one of the range maps on the facing page and thence to the English and Latin names of the species beside it. After that, you can look for the letter part of the combination in a list of abbreviated Latin names of the different forms

illustrated for that species (i.e. subspecies or age-specific plumage) appearing on the right of the range map. After that, if you can still remember what you are doing - not a facetious remark after going through 5 or 6 plates of totally unfamiliar species - you will at last find out, after four steps, that the pretty little bee-eater on plate 33 marked 103f, for example, is the subspecies *cyanophrys* of the Little Green Bee-eater (*Merops orientalis*). Then, if you care to go through the same four steps all over again, you can find out what the bird beside it is. I found this process so annoying that I took a couple of hours to do in pencil what the book designers should have done in type in the first place - namely write the name of every bird beside its portrait, so that the four step learning process is reduced to a one step process (x 350 illustrations = big savings in time and exasperation). At the same time, because I often found it difficult to know, when looking at many illustrations on a plate, where the forms of one species stopped and those of a new, similar species began, I drew solid lines between the species clusters and then, within such groupings, dashed lines between subspecies where appropriate. In a way it was a shame to mark up such a beautiful book but that's what it took to make it user-friendly.\*

Considering that just one of the 123 species covered in this book occurs in Canada, and only six (all kingfishers) in the western hemisphere, many readers may choose to pass on this steeply priced book. Then again, if you want to explore vicariously incredible avian riches of Africa or the Far East - or be inspired to see them for yourself -

then this book should be high on your list. Let me leave you with the following twitch-provoking passage ...

*"Carmine Bee-eaters (the most beautiful bird in the world after all!) follow people, tractors and grazing animals, catching insects disturbed from the grass, and they have the engaging habit of riding on the back of an Ostrich, bustard, stork, Secretary-bird, goat, camel, antelope, zebra or warthog, dashing away every few moments to catch an insect put to flight, and returning to incapacitate it by beating it against the antelope's horns or the Ostrich's back."*

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***The Birds of Quetico Park and the Atikokan Area.*** 1994. By David H. Elder, illustrated by Gisela Ewald. Friends of Quetico Park, P.O. Box 1959, Atikokan, Ontario, P0T 1C0. Paperback. 247 + v pages, black and white photographs, line drawings, and location map. \$14.75 + 8% PST (Ontario Residents) + \$3.50 shipping charges + 7% GST (Canadian Residents) or \$2.50 (U.S. Residents).

As a long-time collector of bird checklists and books that describe the status of species in various areas, particularly Ontario, I was delighted to acquire the latest regional bird book of that sort. Elder's new book is more than just an annotated checklist, however. While it does have much of the detailed species-by-species information that appeals to dyed-in-the-wool bird listers, it also contains a great deal of basic behavioural information that beginning birders or casual visitors to the Quetico-Atikokan area who have a passing interest in birds might find useful.

In particular, there are descriptions of nine habitat types in the area, within each of which the variety of bird life is fairly limited.

\*The journal editors have pointed out to me that at least one other title in this series, namely *Shorebirds*, has plates that are so crowded that it would be rather more difficult to put in names beside all the illustrations. Even in this work, however, and even if it meant using undersize type, it would still be preferable to name each form beside the appropriate illustration. Any book or series calling itself an "identification guide" should **help** the reader to identify rather than using a design that positively hinders that process.

Thus, a reader with only elementary birding skills is able to cope more easily with the task of identifying common birds in any particular habitat. Instead of looking through the entire book for what birds might be expected, one can quickly eliminate the vast majority and focus on the twelve to thirty-two likely species in any habitat which are listed at the end of each habitat description.

More advanced birders, especially those who are visiting from out of province or from even farther afield, can turn to the checklist provided as an appendix, where the status (common, uncommon, rare, or vagrant) of each species is provided. Whenever I travel to an unfamiliar part of the continent, or to other

continents, a book like this one, especially if it has range maps (which most regional guides, including this one, do not have), is of great help to me in determining what the common birds are that I am seeing. The next best thing is a checklist, and this book does provide that, albeit without any indication of seasonal abundance, which would have enhanced the list. If I put myself in the shoes of a birder visiting the Quetico-Atikokan area from some other part of North America (and there probably are a good many who do so on their holidays), I can see myself carrying, along with my Peterson, this useful guidebook and flipping constantly from the habitat descriptions to the checklist and back again. If I had time during my visit to devote to concentrated birding, I would want some directions to local "hot spots" or, better still, the addresses of local birders who might be willing to show them to me. Neither of these appears in this book.

For serious Ontario birders, including, probably, most readers of *Ontario Birds*, *The Birds of Quetico Provincial Park and the Atikokan Area* provides a teasing look at what may be expected in an area that lies solidly within Ontario's boreal forest but is tantalizingly close to the prairie biome and on the margins of the southeastern mixed forest. It is no accident that Ontario birders make pilgrimages to the Rainy River area, some two hundred kilometres to the west, to flesh out their Ontario lists with western species such as American White Pelicans, Swainson's Hawks, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Piping Plovers, Willets, Marbled Godwits, Wilson's Phalaropes, American Avocets, Franklin's Gulls, Western

Kingbirds, Black-billed Magpies, Mountain Bluebirds, Clay-colored Sparrows, Le Conte's Sparrows, Western Meadowlarks, and Yellow-headed Blackbirds. All but four of these have occurred, with varying degrees of regularity, in the Quetico-Atikokan area, despite the distance from the core of their normal ranges. If I had to predict the next four species to appear for the first time in that area, I would single out these four, in descending order of probability: Franklin's Gull, Western Kingbird, American Avocet, Marbled Godwit. Rarer, more western vagrants (Western Grebe, Rufous Hummingbird, Say's Phoebe, Varied Thrush, Sage Thrasher, three Lark Sparrows, and, amazingly an Inca Dove and a Great-tailed Grackle) have also been recorded. It is also no accident that Canada's largest single-day lists are consistently achieved in an area not far from the Quetico-Atikokan region - southeastern Manitoba - where east meets west and north meets south.

Among the southern species which summer at least occasionally and quite possibly breed in the area covered by this book are Upland Sandpipers, Yellow-billed Cuckoos, Eastern Screech-Owls, Red-headed Woodpeckers, Eastern Wood-Pewees, Great Crested Flycatchers, Warbling Vireos, and Pine Warblers, an assemblage that would be unheard of in the Kirkland Lake area, which lies at the same latitude in northeastern Ontario. There are multiple records of Northern Mockingbirds, White-breasted Nuthatches, Summer Tanagers, and Lark Sparrows, and single observations of Least Bittern, Red-shouldered Hawk, Carolina Wren, Loggerhead Shrike, Golden-

winged Warbler, and Prothonotary Warbler. All of this is juxtaposed with all of the typically northern species which seldom occur in southern Ontario.

With a respectable total of 252 species having been recorded in an area that has had little systematic ornithological coverage and in which there are few active birders, the time was ripe for upgrading Peruniak's 1969 and 1971 list, which contained only 107 species. Unfortunately, such a book as this can never be kept up to date; on the very day that this review was written, I learned of the

appearance of the 253rd species (Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch). While definitely a western vagrant, it was not among my four predictions. Elder has done an excellent job of contributing to the ornithological literature of Ontario. At the same time, he has managed, with the artistic assistance of Gisela Ewald, to produce an attractive and reasonably priced book that will appeal to a broad readership. He has also generously donated all of the proceeds from the first printing to Friends of Quetico Park.

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## *Photo Quiz*

by  
Bob Curry

