

## *Book Reviews*

**A Field Guide to the Birds of Peru.** 2001. By *James F. Clements and Noam Shany*. Ibis Publishing Company, Temecula, California. Softcover, 283 pages. \$60US. ISBN 0-934797-18-8.

Finally, it's here! Prior to the publication of this new, long awaited book, if one traveled to Peru, one was forced to make do with regional guides that were in themselves excellent, but did not provide the local focus needed to ensure a complete and satisfying adventure. Too often, birders found themselves guessing at which species they might be viewing based on geographical proximity alone, rather than concise local information. And what would one do about the 118 Peruvian endemics?

As we listen to the news, almost daily it seems, another tropical forest has fallen to the chainsaw and unknown numbers of individual birds or species have died with it. The Republic of Peru has long recognized the importance of wildlife, both from an economic and scientific perspective. The President of the Council of Ministers and Foreign Minister of Peru, His Excellency Javier Perez de Cuellar, in a forward to this book, refers to Peru's priceless heritage and acknowledges the preservation of 32.4 million acres of lands as pro-

tected areas. He goes on to recognize the importance of this book as "filling... a long-felt need by ecotourists and ornithologists". How true his words are. Hopefully, other countries will be as insightful as Peru and take steps to ensure the preservation of tropical forests while there is still time.

At first glance, this looks like all the other new books that cover designated geographic regions of the world, with lots of pretty paintings and ample text that tells one what one needs to know and what to expect in one's travels. But that's where the comparison stops.

Economy of word and space is the key to trying to design and produce a book that will cover over 1800 species adequately in under 300 pages... not an easy task. To accomplish this, the authors have eliminated much of the introductory information that one finds in books of this type – things like prefaces, sections on morphology, and notes on the layout of the book. To me this is fine, with one key exception. I find that as I read the text, mention is understandably made to specific locations, habitat types and Life Zones that are poorly defined in the book, so I spent considerable time trying to figure out where, for example, the Cordillera Vilcanota was, or in fact what it was! I knew from past experience that cordillera

refers to certain types of mountain ranges, but many wouldn't even know that much. Eventually I found a reference on page 243 that it is at the coordinates 14 OS 71 00W – not too helpful I must admit! A few pages dedicated to defining the Life Zones better, talking about habitat types, explaining the significance of elevation to bird distribution and adding a map that shows where the non-political features of the country are would have been very helpful and would have made the book much friendlier. Perhaps all the information is there, but finding it can be a bit frustrating.

All this said, the book is still excellent. It is simple in structure – species accounts interspersed with myriad colour plates! The authors have been somewhat creative in how they share their knowledge with the reader. For example, each family section is prefaced by a short descriptor that speaks about the general attributes of the family, food preferences and foraging techniques, and in some cases (e.g., tinamous) offers tips on identifying the species. Occasionally, interesting tidbits are tossed in. Did you know that the Plantcutters are wasteful eaters? That swallows can use their bill like a trowel because of structural adaptations in the jaw? Of course, why would they want to? You'll have to read the book to find out why.

The species accounts are brief, and include notes on size, descrip-

tions of plumages and comparisons with similar species, preferred habitat types, abundance and range (including altitudinal references where important). The text includes notes on hypothetical species, where substantial information exists to presume their presence, and all threatened species (98) are flagged for the reader. Recognizing that many tropical species are more easily identified by their vocalizations, the authors have researched sources of available recordings for the reader (30 references provided) and it even tells you the catalogue order number for each one! Almost 2/3 of the species have a reference to one of these sources as part of the species account. Anyone who has ever birded the tropics will understand the significance of this feature.

The 128 colour plates depict virtually all the species known to occur in Peru. Although the artwork is simplistic, the features are there and readily discernible. I found the plates to be well organized and uncluttered. Similar species are grouped together and males and females, where sexual dimorphism exists, are depicted. Often, flying birds are shown, which of course can be helpful in identifying some species. Generally, only adults are pictured, which may be a problem in some cases, but with 1800 species covered, something has to be sacrificed. The front and back plates in the book are occu-

pied by maps of the Life Zones, major rivers, cities of Peru, major departments (similar to provinces) and all the Protected Areas.

One nicety that I like is the inclusion of Spanish names for the birds, which serves two purposes: it encourages the local Spanish speaking population to show an interest

in the birds and it allows the traveler to better communicate with the "locals" when trying to find specific birds.

All in all, the wait has been justified and the product is fantastic. I can't wait to go to Peru to try it out. The book can be ordered by e-mail at: [ibispub@msn.com](mailto:ibispub@msn.com).

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