

BOOK REVIEW: *Handbook of the Birds of the World, Volume 1*

by John C. Kricher

Handbook of the Birds of the World, Volume 1, edited by J. del Hoyo, A. Elliott, and J. Sargatal, illustrations by five artists. Barcelona: Lynx Editions (for ICBP, now Birdlife International). 1992. 686 pages with 50 artist color plates of bird species, 14 anatomical plates, and 382 color photographs. \$165.

Birders are faced with expensive choices: where to travel to augment the life list; what optics to choose; and what books to add to one's birding library. Items in these categories generally do not come cheap. It is now normal to commit four or five grand for a good trip, a couple of grand for the best optics (binoculars and scope), and a potentially bottomless financial pit for books, many of which are now priced with three figures before the decimal. Bird books represent substantial monetary investments, so it is wise to select with care.

That said, it is a pleasure to recommend that any serious birder, especially one with global interests, consider the purchase of the quarto-sized volume *Handbook of the Birds of the World, Volume 1*. It is a magnificently produced book with extraordinary art work and photographs as well as lucid, accurate, and highly informative text. As its title makes clear, it is not a regional handbook but treats all of the world's species of birds. Volume 1 deals with ten orders and twenty-seven families, from ostrich to duck. Orders included are Struthioniformes (ratites, such as ostrich), Tinamiformes (tinamous), Sphenisciformes (penguins), Gaviiformes (loons), Podicipediformes (grebes), Procellariiformes (tubenoses), Pelecaniformes (tropicbirds and allies), Ciconiiformes (herons and allies), Phoenicopteriformes (flamingos), and Anseriformes (screamers, ducks, and allies). There are altogether 568 species accounts. To assure completeness of coverage, in cases where there is evidence that a subspecies may be elevated to species status, it is so treated.

The taxonomic sequence adopted is taken from Morony, Bock, and Farrand (which is the classification typically used in current field guides) and does not reflect the major changes suggested by Sibley, Ahlquist, and Monroe based on DNA similarities. The reasoning behind the decision to retain the more traditional, conservative classification is clearly explained in the introduction. In chapter 1 there are two well-designed charts that allow the reader to compare the classification of Morony, Bock, and Farrand with that of Sibley and Monroe. In addition, there are references throughout the text to the controversies that currently exist among taxonomists regarding classification. For example, in the account of the Ciconiiformes, there is discussion of the fact that some systematists regard New World vultures as belonging within this group. As another example, the account of the family Anhimidae (screamers) discusses the DNA evidence that suggests that the Australian Magpie Goose (*Anseranas*

semipalmata) is more closely related to screamers than to ducks and geese, although the Magpie Goose is not lumped with the screamers in this volume, remaining among the Anatidae. Any reader will soon conclude that avian systematics is intellectually turbulent.

To readers familiar with noted North American and British ornithologists, this book will come as a surprise. Most of the editors and authors are from Spain, and thus probably unknown to an American audience. Do not let this dissuade you. The book is published in clear English prose, and these authors perform their duties with distinction.

The first chapter in Volume 1 is a highly readable account of birds as a class of vertebrates. The thirty-eight-page chapter includes fourteen color plates of bird anatomy, which, along with the text, will serve well as a basic primer in ornithology. Reading parts of this section might prove a challenge to some with little background in biology. For example, in the discussion of avian gas exchange, "The principal or primary bronchi are subdivided according to a very definite pattern, with a medioventral series (4-6 bronchi), a mediadorsal one (7-10), and some other bronchi, which are labelled as lateralventral and lateraldorsal." While this sentence may seem a bit obtuse, a glance at the accompanying diagram will make clear what is meant. It is undeniable that the authors have summarized avian biology in a capable, well-illustrated chapter.

The main text of the book is organized by family. Each family account begins with a range map showing the total geographic representation of the family followed by a highly coherent, detailed essay that includes discussion of systematics, morphology, habitat, general habits, voice, food and feeding, breeding, movements, relationship with man, status and conservation, and a general bibliography. Individual species accounts follow. These accounts are in smaller print than the family essays. Each species account includes English and scientific names, plus French, German, Spanish, and additional English common names, plus taxonomy, subspecies and distribution, descriptive notes, food and feeding, breeding, movements, status and conservation, and bibliography. If status and conservation are insignificantly known, it is so designated in red. Endangered or threatened species are also noted in red. Finally, each species account has a range map with color coding.

The species accounts contain a wealth of information. There are comments about range expansions and contractions, estimates of population sizes throughout the species' range, behavioral characteristics, nest colony sizes, and migration patterns. As one example, the species account of Flightless Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax harrisi*) describes the dramatic population reduction attributed to effects of a severe El Niño, as well as the apparent rapid recovery of the population in post-El Niño years. Only the section on descriptive notes is perhaps overly brief, but it nonetheless includes the key field marks that distinguish each species. Most species accounts have in excess of twenty key

references. Indeed, there are over 7000 literature citations in this book, a remarkably complete set of citations.

The *Handbook* is illustrated by five artists, most prominently Francesc Jutglar, who contributed thirty-eight of the fifty color plates of bird species. These artists, to my eye, are uniformly excellent. There are rather small differences in the artists' style, which gives good consistency to the plates. Each plate in this oversized volume has anywhere from ten to twenty-five species illustrated, depending on family. The colors are faithfully reproduced, each plate is extremely sharp, and the artists seem to have a very strong grasp of what these species actually look like. Normally only the adult plumage is illustrated. In cases where species show high levels of sexual dimorphism in plumage, both the male and female are illustrated. Juvenile plumages are not illustrated. In addition to the artwork, there are extraordinary color photographs interspersed throughout the text. The quality with which these are reproduced is second to none. This book is truly a visual treat.

Volume 2 in this series, dealing with New World Vultures through Guineafowl, was published this spring. It looks to be every bit the equal of Volume 1. Ten additional volumes are promised, with Volume 3 expected in the fall or winter of 1996. Should one decide to invest in the entire series, the estimated total cost is conservatively between \$1700-2000. If the other books in the series maintain the current quality, the entire set would, in my opinion, qualify as a bargain (it is, after all, \$3000 for the *Birds of North America* series). This is an utterly superb reference and will serve as such for the indefinite future. The *Handbook* was produced by ICBP (International Council for Bird Preservation), now renamed Birdlife International. BI is certainly to be commended for organizing such a splendid effort.

JOHN KRICHER serves on the board and as a department head for *Bird Observer*. He is currently at work revising and enlarging his book, *A Neotropical Companion* (Princeton University Press).