

BOOK REVIEW: Handbook of the Birds of the World

By Mark Lynch

Handbook of the Birds of the World, Edited by Josep del Hoyo, Andrew Elliott, and Jordi Sargatal. Lynx Edicions.

Volume I: Ostrich to Ducks. 1992. 696 pages, 446 color plates, 568 distribution maps.

Volume II: New World Vultures to Guinea Fowl. 1994. 640 pages, 362 color plates, 540 distribution maps.

Volume III: Hoatzin to Auks. 1996. 822 pages, 449 color plates, 577 distribution maps.

Volume IV: Sandgrouse to Cuckoos. 1998. 674 pages, 306 color plates, 837 distribution maps.

There are estimated to be more than 9,000 species of bird currently extant. Imagine setting yourself the task of seeing every one of these creatures. Consider the crippling cost of trips and guides and the sheer herculean effort and sacrifice of personal time involved in such an endeavor. It's amazing that there is even a handful of people who have "ticked" over 7,000. You can't help but be in awe, and not a little jealous, of those megalisters who seem to be trying to fill every space in this particular stamp album.

Even more impressive is the monumental book series in progress called the *Handbook of the Birds of the World*, the goal of which is to illustrate and describe every species of bird. Can you imagine a more ambitious and daunting project? It was, perhaps, inevitable that such a series would be attempted, given two currently popular types of ornithological literature. One trend in bird book publishing has been to create series of volumes describing every species for increasingly large geographical areas. These are not regional field guides, but scholarly reference works to be used at home. Notable examples of series of this type include *The Birds of Africa* and the venerable nine-volume series, *Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Another type of popular bird book is the "identification guide," which describes and illustrates all the species of one taxonomic family or group from around the world, including all the obscure species from remote corners of the globe. *Buntings and New World Warblers*, published by Oxford University Press in 1994, exemplifies this trend. Both of these types stress completeness and depth beyond what is available in a field guide. The idea of a *Handbook of the Birds of the World* is the answer to "where will all this end?" and the ultimate dream of ornithobibliophiles everywhere.

But what publisher would dare attempt this seeming Everest of bird books? Many readers will not have heard of Lynx Edicions of Barcelona. In 1989 I purchased a book entitled *Where to Watch Birds in Catalonia*, an English

translation of the Catalan original by Josep del Hoyo and Jordi Sargatal, published by Lynx Edicions. I was so impressed by the quality of this specialized birdfinding guide that I promptly went to Catalonia and had one of my most memorable birding holidays. While there, I was further surprised to find that two of the most important birding locations had their own individual field guides, printed on glossy stock and with full color illustrations by Fancesc Jutglar: *Els Ocells del Delta de l'Ebre*, by Albert Martinez-Vilalta and Anna Motis, and *Els Ocells del Parc Natural dels Aiguamolls de l'Emporda*, by Jordi Sargatal and Josep del Hoyo. Both of these slim, attractive volumes were also published by Lynx Edicions. They were analagous to fully illustrated bird guides for Parker River and Monomoy. I began to ask myself, to quote the cinematic Butch Cassidy, "Who are those guys?"

It therefore came as only a slight surprise to me that the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* lives up to most of my expectations. Four volumes of the planned twelve volumes have been published as of this writing. Each bird family chapter in a volume is divided into two parts. The first part consists of a lengthy general account of the family, even if it is a monotypic family like Scopidae (Hamerkop). These sections are dense and packed with information culled from current research, much of which will be unfamiliar to the nonornithologist. I have found these overview sections to be invaluable resources for study and lecture preparation. Each of these chapters has subsections on systematics, morphology, habitat, habits, voice, feeding, breeding, movements, and relationship with man. The writing is informative and authoritative, but still accessible to the general reader. Throughout these sections are numerous large, finely printed color photographs, often of less-known species. Most of these photos have never been seen before by this reviewer. The first volume includes an introduction to the class Aves, with seventeen color anatomical plates and sections on evolution, anatomy, physiology, and behavior.

The second section of each chapter consists of individual species accounts. The species illustrations are very good, better than those in *Birds of the Western Palearctic*. With few exceptions, birds illustrated on a single page are posed in similar postures, facilitating comparison. Most of the species plates are full-page, but monotypic families or families with only a few species, such as Anhimidae (Screamers), are less than a page and combined with the species descriptions. Among the principal artists are Fancesc Jutglar, Ian Willis, and Norman Arlott. These names may not be familiar to North American birders, but are well known to Europeans. Only the adults in alternate plumage of each species are shown. Male and female plumages are illustrated for most species, as well as for many of the distinct subspecies. Opposite these beautiful plates are the species accounts. These are by necessity concise, comparable to or better than what one would find in a very good regional field guide. These species accounts cannot approach the amount of information found in the "identification

guides" or the regional series mentioned above. But they do include information on taxonomy, distribution (with a range map), plumage details, habitat, feeding, breeding and movements, and status and conservation. It should be noted that "traditional" (i.e., pre-Sibley/Monroe) taxonomy is followed.

To keep this monumental series fresh, an unspecified number of periodic updates are also planned. These are to include recent discoveries in evolution and changes in distribution and taxonomy. The implication is that *Handbook of the Birds of the World* should be thought of as an ongoing work.

Should you purchase this outstanding series? This is not a simple question. Obviously one has to consider the steep cost. I paid \$145 as part of a special prepublication offer for volume four. Although this may sound pricey, it is reasonable for a book of this high quality. There is little doubt that if you are considering owning the series, now is the time to start, before any more volumes are published. One way to justify the cash outlay is to think about how much money you spend every year on gas for chasing birds around Massachusetts. Devoted ornithobibliophiles spend many times the cost of one volume on other, much less worthy books every year. Volumes are published every two years, and Lynx Edicions has (so far) stuck to this schedule. This does mean a considerable investment in time will be required to own all twelve volumes.

But it is worth it. The simplest pleasure is, of course, a chance to see all the birds. The panoply of evolution, speciation, and morphological diversity is laid out before your eyes. I like to look up species I have heard of but never seen illustrated. For instance, I immediately turned to the picture of one of the species I like to imagine searching for: the Invisible Rail. With a name like that, you know it's not going to be an easy bird to cross off the old life list. The photographs in these volumes are sumptuous, among the finest I have seen in any ornithology book. But it is the text that is the real surprise. Consistently a pleasure to dip into, it is a treasure trove of new information. It will be a shame if people purchase these volumes for the wonderful illustrations but don't bother to glance at the text. These are coffee table books that are worth reading thoroughly. There is little doubt that the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* is the ultimate series of books for both the birder and the ornithologist.

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