

REVIEWS AND ABSTRACTS

STROUD, D.A., REED, T.M., PIENKOWSKI, M.W. & LINDSAY, R.A. 1987. *Birds, Bogs and Forestry: the peatlands of Caithness and Scotland*. Ratcliffe, D.A. & Oswald, P.H. (eds.) Nature Conservancy Council, Northminster House, Peterborough, PE1 1UA, U.K. 121pp. [£10 including p & pl].

We can all appreciate mountains. Rugged rock and contorted crag have instant and dramatic appeal. By contrast, the charms of the vast open flat expanses of the "Flow Country" in the extreme north of Scotland are perhaps less apparent and less immediate. This landscape has witnessed one of the most contentious conservation battles of recent years. The Scottish Highlands hold some of the most spectacular scenery and wildlife interest in the British Isles, so it is perhaps curious that the low-lying gently undulating moorlands of eastern Sutherland and Caithness fall within this "Highland" category. This most northerly area of mainland Britain used to hold the largest continuous expanse of flat deep blanket bog anywhere in Britain and possibly the world. I stress *used* because under the banner of the strategic need for timber and the right of the wealthy to gain tax relief from investment in afforestation, substantial areas of this unique peatland landscape have been ploughed and planted by both State and especially private forestry.

The loss has been catastrophic. The huge expanse of quaking *Sphagnum* bog and wet heath, studded with dhu lochans, lochs and pools provides a rich habitat for a variety of wetland birds, particularly waders. Many of these wader species require large tracts of uninterrupted mire and several are extremely rare in Britain today. The unbroken ranks of dense alien conifers offer no refuge for the displaced wetland species and an entire ecosystem, unique in the world, has been modified to a bleak timber monoculture.

Although the tundra-like peatland landscape was known to conservationists, it remains a tragedy that the corrugated pattern of the plough and the planting teams began to transform this landscape with little opposition in the early years. It was only in the early 1980's after extensive biological survey work that the full value of the area was appreciated, by which time the areas of greatest scientific interest had been lost. The NCC's report *Birds, Bogs and Forestry* precipitated a storm of argument at the time of its publication. The document only presents, however, the findings of bird-survey work carried out during 1979-1986 and shies away from presenting specific conservation measures for the area. It also does not analyse the economics of forestry in such acid, nutrient-poor and waterlogged substrates. This subject has been reviewed by the RSPB in their 1987 report *Forestry in the Flows of Caithness and Sutherland*.

As a survey report and overview the book is beautifully presented with lavish graphics and excellent photographs throughout. The distribution maps illustrate extremely well the direct competition for the open flat peatlands between the high conservation interests of these flows and the suitability for afforestation. The tabular presentation of the status of the breeding bird populations in the context of comparable areas and their national and international importance are very effective

in demonstrating how important the peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland are for their breeding bird populations, and the obligation on the British government to protect them. Wader census buffs may question the presentation of species density data based on the line-transect sampling methods, but nevertheless, the overall numbers of breeding birds present in different areas underline the disproportionate value of this magnificent area.

The work is stylish, readable and very well written and the text links to the diagrams very effectively. The whole report is a model summary of an ecosystem review and complements the subsequent work (Lindsay, R.A., Charman, D.J., Everingham, F., O'Reilly, R.M., Palmer, M.A., Rowell, T.A. and Stroud, D.A. 1988. *The Flow Country. The Peatland of Caithness and Sutherland*. NCC, Peterborough. 174pp.) which documents the vegetational and peatland interest of the Flows.

Nowhere else has there been such an extensive survey of breeding wader populations and the book is a *must* for anyone interested in Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*, Dunlin *Calidris alpina* and Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*. Ten pounds may seem rather a lot for a paperback book, I would pay that for the photographs and line drawings alone! The fight for the remaining Flow Country has abated slightly with the announcement from the Secretary of State for Scotland of a moratorium on the planting of areas of highest conservation interest which will be protected by approximately 175 000 ha of Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Areas with current planting permission, however, will still be afforested, regardless of their considerable conservation importance. There remains a need for vigilance and continued public awareness of the situation as another 40 000 ha is to be planted over the coming years. The announcement in June this year of the decision to plant a further 1 058 ha of high quality peatlands by the Government's own Forestry Commission is especially worrying, particularly as this decision was against the express advice of the NCC. Buy this book, see where things went wrong over the Flow Country and ensure that we never find ourselves making this terrible mistake again.

Tony Fox

HOLLUM, P.A.D., PORTER, R.F., CHRISTENSEN, S. & WILLIS, I. 1988. *Birds of the Middle East and North Africa*. T. & A.D. Poyser, Calton, U.K. Price £14.

Compared with western Europe, the ornithology of the southern part of the Western Palearctic is poorly developed, but in the past decade or so great progress has been made, especially in Tunisia and parts of the Middle East. Many more birders, both amateur and professional, are visiting the area and studying its birds. Up to now the only accessible guide for the Middle East has been *The Birds of Britain and Europe* by Heinzel, Fitter and Parslow (Collins 1972). On a recent visit to Eilat I noted in a hide in one day copies of this book in six languages! On the other hand the need for a more detailed guide has been clear for some time and the new Poyser production fulfils this admirably.

It should be stated at once that this new book

is not complete in itself and is not intended to be. For species adequately covered by a standard field guide, for example the one mentioned above or *A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe* by Peterson, Mountford and Hollom (Collins 1954) - the preferred choice of the authors of this new book, only brief habitat and status details are given. This somewhat daring approach works well for the intended readership who do not need to be told what a Dunlin *Calidris alpina* looks like. The only snag is that many eastern subspecies, for instance *sakhalina* Dunlin, are not mentioned.

The precise area covered consists of the north African part of the Western Palearctic except Rio de Oro and Mauritania and the Middle East including Turkey, the whole of the Arabian Peninsula and Iran, so in the east this guide extends further than *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. All recorded species are listed. The great strength of this book lies in the detailed identification sections written mainly, I assume, by Philip Hollom. The sections on raptors, wheatears and warblers are

particularly good. Breeding distribution (with maps), voice, habitat and status are also briefly described. There are over 100 line drawings in the text, some very helpful, for example Christensen's eagles, and 40 colour plates placed centrally in the book and again concentrating on the southern species. The quality of the colour plates are more variable: the colours often look rather washed out and a remarkable number of birds apparently have the same pale grey-beige mantles! The raptor paintings are probably the best but the waders are certainly the worst. From a strictly wader point of view this book has some good plover identification descriptions but otherwise it would be better to look elsewhere.

In general I am sure that the publication of this book is to be welcomed. The basic idea is a good one and the identification sections are excellent. With two or three others it should be included in the luggage of every serious birder visiting the area.

H. E. Rose

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