

REVIEWS REVIEWS

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Dijk, A.-J. van, Dijkstra, B., Gelder, W. van jr., Hagemeijer, W., Marteiijn, E., Roder, F. de, Schepers, F. & Christy, P. 1993. *Coastal waterbirds in Gabon. Winter 1992*. WIWO Report No. 41. 293 pp. [Price Dfl. 30.00 (including postage) from WIWO, Dribergseweg 16c, 3708 JB Feist, The Netherlands].

This latest report from WIWO summarises results of an ornithological expedition to coastal Gabon between 15 January and 14 March 1992 closely planned with and supported by WWF. Although Gabon lies on both East Atlantic and Mediterranean flyways, it was previously a major unknown area with respect to knowledge of waterfowl populations and their wetland habitats.

The major aims of the WIWO expedition, amongst others, were to:

- carry out the first complete census of birds using coastal wetlands on Gabon;
- evaluate sites against Ramsar criteria to identify wetlands of international importance; and to
- describe the coastal wetlands and current threats as well as undertaking educational activities with local people.

Major chapters of the report describe the coastal wetland habitats of Gabon; outline methods used on surveys and data extrapolation; give detailed species accounts and then evaluate and describe the ornithological importance of coastal wetlands. A final chapter gives comprehensive details of other fauna observed including not only a full bird species list, but also presenting data on mammals, amphibians and reptiles. Of particular note is detailed

information on nest sites of Leatherback Turtles *Dermochelys coriarea*.

A detailed 16 page French summary, and dual English and French captions for all Tables and Figures will render the report more accessible in Francophone Africa. The species accounts are given in standard format, summarising status in Africa and Gabon before outlining observations made by the expedition. A map of the whole coastal Gabon is given for each major species showing distribution and abundance with three insets showing in more details areas subject to particular study (Baie de Corisco, Estuaire du Gabon and Baie du Cap Lopez).

In total, 65,537 waterbirds of 72 species were counted and the authors estimate, through extrapolation, that a total of 73,300-93,000 birds are present on Gabonese coastal wetlands (including 50,200-61,600 waders).

The majority (c.95%) of the 28 wader species observed was of Palearctic origin, predominantly Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*, Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*, Greenshank *Tringa totanus*, Little Stint *Calidris minutus* and Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*. Most waders were found on the northern intertidal Port of Gabon with 34,000-38,600 in Baie de Corisco, 83,00-11,800 in Estuaire du Gabon and 5,000-7,800 in Baie du Cap Lopez. Due to the absence of mudflats in Gabon Sud only 2,600-2,400 waders were estimated to be present, including a much higher proportion of Afro-tropical species, especially White-fronted Sand Plover *Charadrius marginatus* and Kittlitz's Sand Plover *C. pecuarius*. An observation of two Dunlin *Calidris alpina* was the first for Gabon. On average, wader densities on the intertidal flats were 6.6-8.0 birds/ha and on beaches 5.7 birds/ha - comparable with a number of other west African coastal wetlands.

The authors highlight the fact that Gabon is one of the few remaining countries in the world that still offer exceptional potential for the

conservation of large, undisturbed coastal wetland ecosystems. To this end, the report recommends Ramsar designation for Baie de Corisco, Estuaire du Gabon and Baie du Cap Lopez, together with complementary national protection for a number of other wetlands. Sites of importance are described in detail, and recommendations made for future conservation and research activity.

Although describing itself as a "preliminary" account, there can be no doubt that this report will be an important source for those with all concerned for Gabonese wetlands, their fauna and conservation, for many years. The publication reaches new heights of professionalism and attains the very high standards that we have come to expect from WIWO. Financial support from the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries has aided in the production of a volume that is a pleasure to read. Its publication so soon after the completion of fieldwork is especially notable and puts those of us with notebooks full of unpublished data to shame!

The breadth of information presented in the volume make it essential reading for all those with an interest or involvement in the wetlands and waterbirds of coastal west Africa. It is to be hoped that the information here will not only spur further research, but also aid local conservationists and politicians in the better protection and management of these particularly important coastal ecosystems.

David A. Stroud

Vaughan, R. 1992. *In search of Arctic Birds*. T. & A. Poyser, London.

This book is another in the highly successful Poyser series on birds, but deals primarily with people rather than the birds themselves. It encompasses the history of bird discovery across the Arctic and describes individual studies, so is wide ranging in its scope.

The early chapters introduce the Arctic, its environment and its birds,

and how they are adapted to this relatively young life zone. There then follows an account of the role of birds in the way of life of the Eskimos, as food and clothing, and in their mythology. The relationship with man then develops as Europeans first enter the Arctic, as whalers and explorers. Information on birds was often collected incidentally in these early days.

Chapter 4 then switches emphasis, focusing on falcons in the Arctic, particularly the Gyr Falcon *Falco rusticolus* and its lure as a prize for falconry. Bird collecting as a scientific pursuit started in the 19th century and there are detailed accounts of the collecting trips made by the Americans in the Nearctic and the British in Scandinavia and Russia. Several species eluded these early collectors and so reached "Holy Grail" status. Among these were the eggs of the Knot - one of the waders that nest at the northern extremities of the Arctic and with a difficult nest to find because incubating birds sit so tightly. There is actually an error in attributing the finding of a Knot *Calidris canutus* nest in Iceland to Adam Watson. It was, in fact, the nest of a Purple Sandpiper *Calidris maritima*. Surprisingly, the Little Stint *Calidris minuta* was also eagerly sought despite it being a relatively easy nest to find and occurring in northern Scandinavia. The skin of the beautiful Ross's Gull *Rhodostethia rosea* was also prized and there are graphic details of the first to be shot and the mass slaughter of migrating Ross's Gulls at one locality, collecting more than in all the museums of the world.

Geese received special attention in Chapter 8. The great books of Arctic Ornithology are described in Chapter 9 and we receive accounts of their authors. One of the great strengths of this book is the coverage that has been devoted to the Russian literature (Chapter 10). Because of language barriers much of this is unknown to ornithologists in the west, though some have been translated (e.g. Uspenky's book). The last meaty chapter (11) gives accounts of studies in Greenland, Alaska, Canada and Spitsbergen. The accounts bring us

up to date. Thus, amongst the names of famous explorers of the past, like Nansen and Parry one also finds a sprinkling of names from the Wader Study Group.

Chapter 12 deals with how to get to the Arctic. Nowadays it is relatively easy, but expensive, to travel to the Arctic overflying the difficult terrain and sea that earlier explorers travelled by foot, sledge or sail.

Finally, the conservation of this sensitive part of the world is highlighted. Fortunately, large national parks now protect many areas. Indeed the largest park in the world (700,000 sq. km) covers north and east Greenland, and is soon to be joined by another large reserve in the eastern Arctic, on the Taimyr Peninsula. Waders do not feature strongly in the book, except for the hunting of Knot nests. However, there are incidental references to waders throughout the book showing them in context with the other avifauna.

The book has been well researched - there are 23 pages of references. However, given the limitation of space, the exploits of each explorer receive only summaries of achievements, so that the character of the early workers does not shine through. However, it does whet the appetite to delve into original texts. For example, it is only in Trevor-Battye's narration of his journey over Kolguyev Island that one can imagine the quintessential Englishman striding the tundra with his "man" trailing behind carrying the tins of potted grouse. Also, one needs to read Seeborn's book to re-live his journey with Harvie-Brown as they shot and skinned their way around the Pechora.

Richard Vaughan is clearly an excellent photographer but, alas, the reproduction of his, and Pavel Tomkovich's photographs is poor since they lack contrast. Generally, it is sad to see the standard of photographs in natural history books slip from the crisply focused black & white of yester-year. Given that the book is a historical account about the

people who searched for Arctic birds I would have preferred to have seen reproductions of photographs and lithographs of the eminent fathers of Arctic ornithology rather than bird photographs. In Seton Gordon's book *Amid Snowy Wastes*, there is an evocative photograph of Seton stalking a Purple Sandpiper with his large box camera whilst wearing a kilt. It is as much the colourful eccentricity of the characters who pursued birds as the story they told about the bird that makes this part of the world so fascinating. I'm glad to say that nothing has changed since national eccentricity still reigns today. In 1991, the first South African to visit the Taimyr Peninsula, Les Underhill, bemused the fur clad Russians by sporting flip-flops and jazzy shorts when the temperature climbed over 20^o!

The book is a must for those interested in Arctic ornithology as it provides a good overview of the subject and acts as a good starting point for one's own adventures to this fascinating region.

Ron Summers

RSPB 1994. *Wet grasslands - what future?* RSPB, Beds., UK. 28 pp. Available from RSPB, The Lodge, Sandy, Beds. SG19 2DL, UK, for £5 incl. postage.

This RSPB report describes the loss of wet grassland in the UK, their birds and other wildlife, the reasons for the losses and the proposed positive solutions. It calls for more effective protection for wet grasslands, for such sites to be managed appropriately for their wildlife, and for a major programme of wet grassland creation in river valleys and the coastal plain. These actions have been grouped under the phrase "the wetland challenge". The report details changes to wetland grassland bird populations, especially waders, drawing on long-term monitoring programmes. The report is targeted at policy makers, but provides a well presented digest of information concerning the current health of the UK's wet grasslands and their waders.