

BIRDER'S BOOKSHELF

Birds of the Middle East and North Africa

P. A. D. Hollom, R. F. Porter, S. Christensen, and Ian Willis. *T & A D Poyser Ltd., Staffordshire, England. 1988. 280 pp., 40 color plates and line drawings by Ian Willis. Hardbound, \$32.50. Available from Buteo Books, P.O. Box 481, Vermillion, SD 57069 (add \$2.00 handling charge).*

I WISH I COULD HAVE GIVEN THIS NEW field guide a favorable review. It is superficially attractive, with an especially sturdy binding and handsome color plates that are captioned by calligraphy rather than by letterpress. But with any field guide, usefulness is more important criterion than mere attractiveness, and I have serious misgivings about many aspects of this book. Although I have not yet tried it out in the

field, I could retroactively imagine using it during the 17 days I spent birding in Israel. Fortunately we had an excellent tour guide (Mark Van Beirs) on that trip; had I had to rely on my own resources and the Hollom *et al.* field guide, I would have been constantly frustrated.

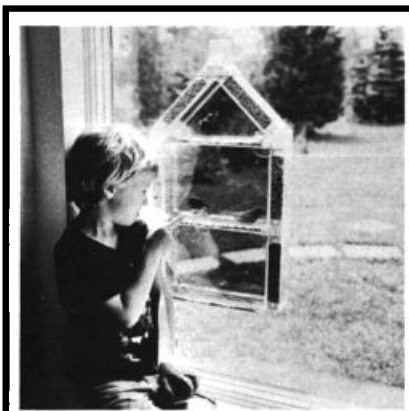
Some of the problems in using this book (abbreviated HPCW hereafter) have to do with its format. Although the typeface in the text is no smaller than that used in Peterson, Mountfort and Hollom's field guide to European birds (hereafter PMH), the lines are set closer together and are 11 cm long rather than the 9 cm of the European guide. This produces a dauntingly massive "Identification" paragraph, which is further hampered by its typographical uniformity. Although key field marks are italicized, the readability of the text would have profited further by additional typographically distinct headings for plumage categories (winter, female, juvenile, etc.) and for behavioral characters. Characters of additional races of polytypic species are also buried in the text. It is difficult enough to read this book in my office; finding critical points in the field would, I think, be almost impossible except for those individual birds that may be willing to hold still for adequate periods.

Far more critical factors contributing to the inadequacy of this book as a field guide were several deliberate editorial policies. The most obvious of these was the decision to omit illustrations and text descriptions of those species covered by the PMH European guide. This was obviously done to save space, as there are many northern Palearctic species that pass through or winter in the area covered by the new guide. Yet full treatment, with illustration, is given by HPCW for at least 20 species that are vagrants (or even extirpated) in the area of coverage, rather than these being relegated to an appendix as in PMH. The reader is referred to PMH for several species for which that book figures only the "breeding" or "summer" plumage, whereas in the area covered by HPCW the species will be seen most often in plumages not shown by PMH. These include, for example, the Ringed, Little

Ringed, and Kentish plovers, plus the Dotterel. The HPCW entry for the Long-toed Stint refers the reader to PMH, but that species is included in that book only in the section of accidentals, with no figure, and it has apparently been recorded more often in the area covered by HPCW than in that of PMH. There are many groups of which several difficult species occur in the HPCW area, such as crakes, pratincoles, shorebirds, gulls, terns, swifts, and Old World warblers; the text presents a mixture of full coverage and "See PMH" for these, necessitating the near-impossible juggling of two books to find appropriate field marks.

Another editorial decision that, in my opinion, was detrimental to efficient field use of HPCW was the limitation of the maps to *breeding* localities only. Many, if not most birding visitors to the Middle East and North Africa will be there during the migration or wintering periods; the species distributions during these periods are covered only by brief and often perfunctory text statements, usually in terms of entire countries such as "Egypt" or "Iraq" or even "Arabia" = the whole peninsula.

The color plates by Willis are the best part of this book, although some, such as the plovers of Plate 14, seem to have been printed a bit too pale and grayish (at least in my copy). Many of the individual figures are notably lifelike for field guide illustrations, although some, such as gulls, terns, swifts, and swallows are unfortunately tiny. Lacking the copyrighted Peterson dashes to emphasize critical field marks, one must study the plates carefully in conjunction with the text to sort out difficult groups such as larks and warblers. The figures of the two species of skimmer are so small that the differences described in the text for neither bill color nor tail pattern are evident. The two plates of wheatears (28 and 29), an especially abundant and diverse group in the region covered, are somewhat more conventionally stiffly posed; the useful drawing on p. 185 of wheatears flying away from the viewer unfortunately includes only six of the 17 species in the plates, although some of the latter are sufficiently distinctive not to need such drawings.



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The inconsistent nature of the book is typified by the treatment of the very similar Little Tern (*Sterna albifrons*) and Saunder's Little Tern (*S. saundersi*) versus that of the races of Lesser Whitethroat (*Sylvia curruca curruca*, *althaea*, and *minula*). For the terns, only *saundersi* is figured, the reader being referred to PMH for *albifrons*. On the other hand, the race of Lesser Whitethroat that is included in PMH is nevertheless figured in color in HPCW, along with figures for *althaea* ("Hume's Lesser Whitethroat") and *minula* ("Desert Lesser Whitethroat," inadvertently labeled "Desert Lesser Warbler" on plate 32).

The need for space-saving that dominates this book would have been alleviated had the geographic area of coverage been reduced. After all, it took two major volumes to cover this area in manual format: Etchécopar and Hüe on North Africa, and Hüe and Etchécopar on the Middle East; although the latter book extends its coverage somewhat farther east (to include Afghanistan), it omits the entire Arabian Peninsula. It might well have been better to produce a new and complete field guide to the Middle East alone. Of the land birds whose breeding ranges are mapped in HPCW, 136 are confined to the Middle East and 21 confined to North Africa (many, of course, are found in both areas). The birds of North Africa and, in fact, the Middle East as far east as the Aral Sea (but not south of the heads of the Red Sea and Persian Gulf), including both resident and migrants, are already reasonably well covered by Heinzel, Fitter, and Parslow's European field guide (HFP), which also maps winter and migration ranges of all species. For all but the southern portions of the area covered by HPCW, and not by HFP, I must consider the latter to be the field guide of choice. —Kenneth C. Parkes.

Birds of Yellowstone

Terry McEneaney. 1988. 171 pp. Roberts Rinehart Inc., Box 3161, Boulder, CO. 80303. \$8.95

VISITORS TO YELLOWSTONE WHO seek some of the park's bird specialties will find this guide very useful. The author describes it as "first and

foremost a finder's guide to Yellowstone birds." It succeeds admirably, and with copious detail.

He describes the park from a bird-finding perspective and specifies the places to go to find such park birds as harlequin ducks, great gray owls, and bald eagles.

The book follows a format which previous bird books on Yellowstone (1976) and Grand Teton (1984) have used: a central section describing selected bird specialties of the park, with a checklist at the end. This checklist uses the year-graph format (similar to the one in the Lane/Holt Birds of Colorado), and packs in lots more detail, like

where to find each species, the likelihood of finding them, and the best time of the year to look.

The fires of 1988 contribute the only problem I can think of: changes to park forest habitats and therefore changes on where to find forest species, and perhaps changes to access to some Yellowstone back country sites may make some information out-of-date. The fires also will create enormous opportunities to study changes in birdlife in the park.

The book has nice sketches by Karen McEneaney and handsome color photographs of the 20 "characteristic" Yellowstone birds selected for species accounts.—Hugh Kingery.

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