

Books

SYLVIA WARBLERS. By Hadoram Shirihi, Gabriel Gargallo, and Andreas Helbig. 2001. Illustrated by Alan Harris. Photographic Editor and Field Photographer: David Cottridge. Distribution maps by C. S. Roselaar. Edited by Guy Kirwan and Lars Svensson. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. Hardcover, 576 pp. 50.00 pounds Sterling; U.S. \$75.00.

The spring migration of warblers in eastern North America has to be one of the jewels in the crown of field ornithology; 30 brilliantly plumaged and distinctive species, all passing through a location in two or three weeks. In the Old World, the bird-watcher is perhaps less fortunate; the Palearctic warblers, not closely related to their New World namesakes, can be, in a word, challenging, tending to come in two broad categories: small, green and confusing, and small, brown and confusing. Fortunately, not all Old World Warblers are quite such identification nightmares; the genus *Sylvia*, the subject of this book, mostly consists of well-marked and attractive little birds which, while not totally without some identification pitfalls, do not generally have the ability of genera, such as *Acrocephalus*, to reduce grown bird-watchers to tears.

The book deals primarily with only 17 species with a breeding distribution largely in the western Palearctic, most heavily concentrated in the northern Mediterranean basin. A further five species of mostly African distribution are covered, somewhat more briefly, at the end. The first 40-odd pages are devoted to an introduction which is comprehensive, scholarly, and highly informative. Whether or not you have an interest in Old World Warblers, this section is worth detailed study; all the more so if you are a bander, since the portions devoted to molt and plumage terminology, age classes, and general techniques of aging and sexing are of universal applicability and are written well and clearly. Particularly informative is the use of detailed color diagrams for each species, and sometimes race, explaining molt pattern and strategies. A section on the genus *Sylvia*, dealing with phylogeny, evolutionary relationships, and diversity, while possibly not specifically of interest to North American ornithologists, is a worthwhile

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treatment. There are further sections on the biology and ecology of the genus, the song, breeding biology and ecology on the wintering grounds, on migration and all the ancillary information associated with migratory species, such as fat deposition and migratory orientation. Although written with this specific genus in mind, these illustrate universal principles and could be read with profit by anybody interested in migratory birds in general.

The bulk of the book, more than 500 pages, consists of the species accounts. I am staggered by the depth and detail of the information presented. It is, in a word, encyclopaedic. Much of it comes from the studies carried out personally by the authors and their colleagues. Each species account starts with a brief introduction, including notes on races, and continues with a very detailed section on field identification with notes on all plumage types, a very useful section entitled "The major pitfalls" (i.e., the problems of confusable species); a section on songs and calls, often including details of different races and backed up by sonograms; a section on identification in the hand, again often separated by races and giving much detail on subspecific characteristics; a treatment of the taxonomy of allospecies and subspecies; a large section on molt, age, and sex, with colored schematics of molt strategy; exquisitely detailed plumage descriptions of all age and sex combinations; a section on general biology, with colored maps of breeding and wintering ranges and the distribution of subspecies; sections on migration, habitat, diet, behavior, and the general biology and ecology of subspecies; population size and trends; and an appendix of biometric data, separated by races. The authors have introduced an interesting treatment of the biometric data for several species, graphically plotting wing and tail lengths on a two-dimensional matrix; in some cases, for example that of Marmora's and Balearic warblers, which are accorded full specific status, there is almost no overlap between the two taxa.

In addition to all this, there are the illustrations. Each species has at least one full plate, painted by Alan Harris. The quality of this artwork is superb,

accurate, comprehensive and, aesthetically, very satisfying. Clearly, Mr. Harris is establishing himself as one of the most talented bird illustrators presently active. There are also some more whimsical "jizz" sketches, which I must admit do very little for me. As well as the painted plates, there are a variable number of colored photographs, often several pages per species. These include both photographs taken in the field and close-ups of birds in the hand, specifically chosen to illustrate different points of plumage with regard to age, sex, and race. Obviously, very great care has been taken with these photographs (even the fingernails are clean, in marked contrast to my own hand-held shots!); they have been chosen carefully to augment the age and sex criteria mentioned in the text. In some cases confusing species are situated on the same page to illustrate distinctions.

The entire book is simply overwhelming in its scope and detail, and superb in its execution. I cannot think of any relatively small group of birds anywhere which has been treated so comprehensively. Could it be improved? No obvious ways occur to me, apart from one personal suggestion

from someone who has spent considerable time looking at banding data. Unlike the situation with North American warblers, as a result of the enormous amount of work in Europe (and in a few outlying areas, like Israel and eastern Africa), there is now a very large data base of recovery information for many species of *Sylvia*. It would have been very interesting and informative to have included an analysis of these data, which would undoubtedly have enhanced the sections on migration and ranges. Perhaps in the next edition?

For North American bird-watchers *Sylvia Warblers* stands as an object lesson on what could be done on our continent. For Europeans, it must be an indispensable addition to their libraries. For bird-banders everywhere, it should be essential reading. I only hope that the authors and illustrator can now be encouraged to set their sights on the rest of the Sylviidae—the *really* difficult ones!

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Magnolia Warbler
by George West