

# Ornithological Literature

Edited by William E. Davis, Jr.

**THE AUKS.** By Anthony J. Gaston and Ian Jones, illustrated by Ian Lewington, line drawings by Ian Lewington and Ian Jones. Oxford University Press, New York, New York. 1998: xx plus 349 pp., 8 color plates with caption figs., 41 figures, 32 maps, 43 tables 29 photographs. ISBN 0-19-8540320-9. \$75 (Cloth).—This book summarizes the biology of these northern seabirds. The authors have spent much time studying many species of auks and are well prepared to summarize the biology of these northern seabirds. As the authors point out, these birds are primarily marine organisms but most studies have been conducted at their breeding sites on land.

The book includes three sections: Plan of the book, General chapters, and Species accounts. The Plan of the book is comparable to the introduction in most books: it explains the intent of the authors and the layout of the book. This section includes an important table presenting common nomenclature between Europe and North America. The plates of the species are excellent. Literature coverage is extensive. The book is written in British English rather than American English.

The General chapters include 7 chapters: *Auks and their world*, *Systematics and evolution*, *Distribution and biogeography*, *Auks and ecosystems*, *Social behavior*, *Chick development and the transition from land to sea*, and *Populations and conservation*. These chapters include the authors' understanding of the family, comparative analyses, and syntheses. These are worth the price of the book. These chapters are strong in that they deal with auks at sea as well as the breeding on land. Sections in these chapters are usually one to a few pages in length. As summaries, these cover the material adequately but each could be expanded into a more thorough monograph. Our understanding of these birds has developed slowly because these are marine birds breeding in remote areas. These summary chapters include an important historical perspective when dealing with auks and people, scientific dis-

covery of auks and systematics. These sections allow the reader to put the literature into an historical perspective. We are only now increasingly understanding their marine biology, while often information in the literature is based on early articles based on early assumptions.

The authors discuss the biology of these birds at sea and during breeding at land. Some comparisons are among most auks and related species; some comparisons are among select auk species. These comparisons are important in keeping these birds in perspective with other seabirds, and for understanding how they are adapted to their marine environment. The chapter on populations and conservation is very timely. It includes sections on changes in populations, species of concern, as well as fisheries impacts. While this is a good review, it should have included more timely information on immediate issues. The Species accounts are well written. They include sections on Description, Range and status, Habitat, food and feeding behavior, Displays and breeding behaviour, Breeding and life cycle, and Population dynamics. It would have been nice to include a summary of the conservation status.

This is a fine book with a great deal of information. However, confusion may result from inconsistencies among, and in some cases poor organization of, tables, figures, and maps. Caption formats are different between the General chapters and the Species accounts. Timing of activity at colonies is dealt with inconsistently among the species accounts but is summarized in a table in the chapter on Social behaviour under the confusing heading of Activity timing. Furthermore, in the tables that include measurements in the Species accounts, data are summarized according to reference numbers with no indication as to where to find the references, leaving it to the reader to guess where in the text these reference numbers are indicated. Maps in the first seven chapters have a figure number (without mention of Fig.); among the species accounts,

maps do not contain a figure number or a title, leaving it to the reader to assume that these are for the species accounts in which they are included. Finally, among range maps, the summer range coloration is often difficult to distinguish from the background map coloration. These problems will lead to confusion and detract from an otherwise fine and informative book.

The seven summary chapters present the author's family analyses and strongly based understanding of these birds. This information is well worth the book. The species accounts and difficulty in extracting information are disappointing.—MALCOLM C. COULTER.

**THE ECOTRAVELLERS' WILDLIFE GUIDE TO COSTA RICA.** By Les Beletsky. Academic Press, San Diego, California, 1998: 426 pp., 80 color plates, 19 habitat photos. \$27.95.

**THE ECOTRAVELLERS' WILDLIFE GUIDE TO BELIZE AND NORTHERN GUATEMALA.** By Les Beletsky. Academic Press, San Diego, California, 1998: 488 pp. 104 color plates, 20 habitat photos. \$27.95.

**THE ECOTRAVELLERS' WILDLIFE GUIDE TO TROPICAL MEXICO.** By Les Beletsky, Academic Press, San Diego, California, 1999: 497 pp. 104 color plates, 21 habitat photos. \$27.95.—Each of these volumes is part of a series recently released under the sponsorship of the Wildlife Conservation Society and authored by Les Beletsky. As all of the volumes are quite similar they are reviewed together. The books are intended as ecological introductions. There is a brief opening section about ecotourism that is essentially identical in each of the books, as is the structure of each book. There is an ecological overview of the country followed by chapters on how to use the book and on conservation issues. The major parts of each book are chapters on amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals, and, in the Belize book, on marine life. Unfortunately terrestrial in-

vertebrates are totally ignored. There is nothing about butterflies or other prominent invertebrates in either book. It is disappointing to look in the index and see reference to antbirds, anteaters, antshrikes, ant-tanagers, anthruses, but not to ants!

Birds are featured prominently in these books, the bird chapter being 89 pages long in Costa Rica, 80 pages long in Belize, 83 pages long in Tropical Mexico (with 50 color plates on birds in each book). Much of the text and plates is duplicated among the three volumes. Chapters on taxa discuss natural history, breeding, ecological interactions, lore and notes, and conservation issues. "Profiled" species are illustrated on the plates. Illustrations are large format and are confined to (arguably) the most common species. For most readers of *The Wilson Bulletin* these guides will not be useful in field identification of birds because too many species are omitted. However, these books will help bird watchers and ornithologists to identify amphibians and reptiles, many of which are not illustrated in convenient field-sized books. As with birds, better and more complete guides exist for mammals and fish. It is regrettable that Beletsky selected tropical Mexico, much of which duplicates what he includes in his Belize book, rather than western Mexico, where there are major avifaunal as well as other taxonomic distinctions.

Beletsky's text draws heavily from the published literature and does a credible job of presenting sound overviews of the subject matter. The text ranges widely, from summaries of why some birds have evolved to become frugivores to Mayan legends about how hummingbirds became so bright. Much information, though charming in a way, is superfluous to a utilitarian field guide. The lore and notes sections abound with such quaint insights as the belief that cows belonging to a farmer who has destroyed a swallow's nest will give bloody milk. We are told (in each volume) that the Common Raven (*Corvus corax*) is the largest passerine, though the author readily acknowledges that they do not occur in Costa Rica, Belize, northern Guatemala, or the Mexican Yucatan. I always thought the Superb Lyrebird (*Menura novae-hollandiae*) was actually the largest passerine (neither does it occur in the Neotropics).

Nonetheless, visitors to the countries profiled should find the appropriate book useful in gaining a better understanding (and a fair dose of trivia) about the local vertebrate wildlife.—JOHN KRICHER.

**A BIRD-FINDING GUIDE TO MEXICO.** By Steve N. G. Howell, illus. by Sophie Webb. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York. 1999: 365 pp., 54 locality maps. \$20 softcover.—This is an exciting addition to the libraries of couch-birders and those eager to bird or investigate new corners of Mexico. This compact and well-organized guide is 6" × 9" and appears to be solidly bound. Steve, Sophie, and their occasional fellow travelers have spent hundreds of days and nights in fine resorts, dives, and camping sites to gather locality lists for 111 sites from Baja to the Yucatan. Every locality map is extremely useful to any visitor, although indicated habitat may be altered in time.

This is the first detailed information on many important sites in Mexico, many of which scream for recognition and protection. Very few sites are protected in Mexico. Locality descriptions are well written, to the point, and include attention to directions within a tenth of a kilometer. Comments on availability of second-class buses and camping sites are included for those without their own (or rental) vehicles and those on limited budgets. The species lists are English common names only, and wisely run in 4 columns per page (very economical). Relative abundances are not given, except for those rarely seen. Mexican endemics are bolded in the text and lists.

A variety of taxonomic decisions and English name selections differ from Seventh Edition of the A.O.U. Check-List of North American Birds (1998). Most involve "splits" as both the world bird species list and the Dow Jones Average struggle to pass 10,000. Well-differentiated subspecies clusters are given distinct English names in anticipation of these forms being given full species status in the future. Numbers gathering bird listers pressure for all splits, boo all lumps. One would hope to see less attention by birders focused on one unit of taxonomy

and more attention to higher (genus) and lower (subspecies) levels in the future. As for the names selected, it's great to see the use of whitestart replacing redstart for members of the genus *Myioborus*. Redstart was created for Old World thrushes with red on the tail, and is erroneously used for an American parulid which could easily be renamed Oran-gestart, *Setophaga ruticilla*. There is no red in the tail of any *Myioborus*, most have no red anywhere, and they are no longer placed adjacent to *Setophaga*! Guy Tudor and I came up with whitestart back in the late 1970s as a solution. This British author has sold his publisher on using grey in place of the American gray throughout in contradiction of the 1998 A.O.U. Check-List. I am concerned with using subspecific modifiers in front of species names; it can create much confusion. Perhaps it should be Sooty race of Fox Sparrow or Fox Sparrow (Sooty race) for *Passerella iliaca unaleschensis*, not Sooty Fox Sparrow.

This book is not designed for "lite birders" doing cruises of the Mexican Riviera, the whale lagoons, or the islands of the Gulf of California, nor for those doing single destination beach resort vacations. It will greatly aid self sufficient, street-smart birders and ornithologists with a taste for adventure and great birding. Great job Steve!—PETER ALDEN.

**THE BIRDS OF SONORA.** By Stephen M. Russell and Gale Monson, illus. By Ray Harm. The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, Arizona. 1998: 360 pp., 2 color plates, 34 b+w figures. ISBN 0-8165-1635-9. \$75 hardcover.—A long awaited book authored by two excellent fieldmen who have lived just across the border in or near Tucson for years. This is a fairly heavy book (8½" × 11") focused on the ranges, habitats, seasonal abundances, historical records, and current status of over 500 species of birds. It accomplishes its tasks well, especially with the well-researched range maps for most species. This work is the first update in many decades for a province that should attract many more birders from the southwestern states. Sonora has tropical deciduous forest around the colonial hilltown of

Alamos, great pine-oak woodland in the Sierra Madre Occidental, and cactus-scapes of the Sonoran Desert.

The dust jacket features a colorful White-fronted Parrot (*Amazona albifrons*), which is not reproduced within and lost to users of libraries that routinely toss dust jackets. Nice to see the separate large maps of mountain ranges, cities, rivers and reservoirs, and the full color vegetation map in the introduction. I question the wisdom of using only the metric system to indicate elevations and distances. Outside of scientific circles the metric system is dying in the U.S., why obfuscate the majority of the book's users? Add American equivalents in parentheses.

The geographical coverage excludes the Sonoran Islands in the Gulf of California. Isla Tiburon and other islets have no endemic birds and this book should have included a summary of known residents and visitors. While habitat loss is discussed and lamented, a rundown of any protected areas and a focus on areas most in need of protection would have been welcome.

The appendices cover plants named in the text, an exhaustive gazetteer useful to any biologist, and literature cited. Adding a Spanish common name throughout the text and including them in the index is an outstanding step. One hopes this will be made available in Spanish for Sonoran citizens.

Wouldn't it be nice to have similar books state by state throughout Mexico being researched and published in an orderly fashion? This would be a good model.—PETER ALDEN.

Field Guide to Mexican Birds (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1973). As a portable pocket guide it is significantly wider than the Peterson's (fitting fewer pockets), the artwork a bit stiff and stylized. The text is concise and the book well indexed between text and plates and back. The sequence of families and species in the color plates is jumbled and confusing. Neither book has range maps. Gray is spelled gray not grey in Edwards.

At four times the size and weight of the Edwards or Peterson/Chalif, Steve Howell's and Sophie Webb's *A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America* (New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 1995) is the clear choice for serious students of Mexican birdlife with its exhaustive text, superior plates, and excellent range maps. However, its bulk and weight will force many to consider leaving it at home or in the car when deciding which of the two portable quick reference guides to take in the field. The Edwards book gives much less thought to taxonomic changes and English name modification than does Steve Howell's works, a mixed blessing.

The time has come to stop redoing attempts to cover close to 1100 species of birds from such disparate places in 4–6 countries. What's needed is field guides to Pacific slope birdlife, Gulf and Caribbean slope birdlife, highland birdlife, etc. No matter where you are, one's book has over 50% of its species totally inapplicable to wherever you are. Far more useful would be a guide to, say, just Yucatan, Belize, and Caribbean Guatemala's birds. That's one area that can support such a smaller geographical focus book.—PETER ALDEN.

**A FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF MEXICO AND ADJACENT AREAS (BELIZE, GUATEMALA, AND EL SALVADOR)**, third edition. By Ernest Preston Edwards, principal illustrator Edward Murrell Butler. University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas. 1998: 284 pp. incl 51 color plates. \$35 hardcover, \$17.95 softcover.—Ernest Edwards has been a pioneer in producing a series of bird-finding guides and compact bird field guides to Mexico. This third edition updates names and taxonomy, adds a few plates, and competes with the Peterson's and Chalif's

**CHECKLIST OF THE BIRDS OF EURASIA**. By Ben F King. Ibis Publishing, Vista, California. 1997: 105 pp. \$19.95 (paper).—Ben King has produced a concise and functional birder's checklist to the contiguous continents of Europe and Asia, plus their attendant islands, ranging all the way from Iceland to Novaya Zemlya to Japan, the Philippines, the Greater Sundas, and Wallacea, two-thirds of the Old World, in fact. For purposes of distributional coding, King has partitioned this vast expanse into ten regions: Europe, the

Middle East, the former Soviet Union, Japan, the Indian Subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, the Greater Sundas, the Philippines, and Wallacea. The list follows "generally" that of Peters' world list, and includes 3062 species. Taxonomy is reported to be conservative, although the author notes that he has adopted "some new ideas from the literature as well as unpublished field studies, especially where they appear to corroborate my own experience." The checklist indicates regional presence or absence, but provides no information on status (e.g., breeding, migrant, vagrant) or abundance. The author notes that introduced species are, in many cases omitted. Species endemic to a single one of King's regions are indicated by boldface.

The main focus of King's six page introduction is the construction and clarity of English names. From King's strongly worded statement, it is clear that a main purpose of this checklist was to provide a standardized and revised set of English names for the birds of Eurasia. King notes that names that are elitist or that are difficult to pronounce need to be changed, as do patronyms memorializing westerners. Conducting such a nomenclatural "cleansing" must be a difficult task, indeed. And it is interesting to compare King's bird names against those used in the array of other checklists and field guides for the region. For reasons of space I will focus only on a few widespread Asian passerine species that happen to also inhabit Wallacea, an area familiar to me. For this I refer to the English names used in King and Dickinson's (1975) *Field Guide to the Birds of South-East Asia*, White and Bruce's (1986) *Birds of Wallacea*, Inskipp et al.'s (1996) *Annotated Checklist of the Birds of the Oriental Region*, and Coates and Bishop's (1997) *Guide to the Birds of Wallacea*. At least for these widespread Asian species, the names King today chooses to use are all quite reasonable, and, in fact, the nomenclature across the various publications produced over a 24 year span is surprisingly uniform.

It is rare that one can obtain consensus on English names, even when working in committee. I am happy to report, however, that, at least by comparison of 16 widespread songbird species that served as my sample exhibit vary little variation in name in the six sampled

texts. Of these 16, only 4 were represented by more than one name (Red Avadavat/Strawberry Waxbill, Chestnut/Black-headed Munia, Hair-crested/Spangled Drongo, and Eurasian Tree-Sparrow/Tree Sparrow). One of the birds with two names, the drongo, is in fact a geographically variable taxon that may constitute more than a single species. Thus it is evident that even for Southeast Asian birds there is considerable stability and uniformity of English nomenclature. Still, given that King deals with 3000 species, there will be plenty of species with multiple English names in current use. Thus, one of the disappointments of the King checklist is that alternative names are not listed, probably because of space limitations.

The checklist is completed by a comprehensive index of English and scientific names, which lists all scientific names by species (e.g., "*leucophaeus*, *Dicrurus*") and all English names by group-name (e.g., "Drongo, Ashy"). At the very least I would have preferred to see listing by genus, as well (e.g., "*Dicrurus leucophaeus*"). That complaint aside, this is a compact, well-produced, and useful checklist that covers a huge avifauna. This will be a must buy for many world birders and ornithogeographers.—BRUCE M. BEEHLER.

THE HANDBOOK OF BIRD IDENTIFICATION FOR EUROPE AND THE WESTERN PALEARCTIC. By Mark Beaman and Steve Madge, illus. by Hilary Burn, Martin Elliott, Alan Harris, Peter Hayman, Laurel Tucker, and Dan Zetterström. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. 1998: 868 pp., 291 color plates with captions, 77 other color illustrations dropped in the text elsewhere, 625 color-coded range maps, \$99.50 (cloth).—This book, originally published in Great Britain by Christopher Helm, is a monumental achievement. It covers almost 900 species known to have occurred in the Western Palearctic, the area defined for the 9-volume Oxford University Press series edited by S. Cramp et al., *The Birds of the Western Palearctic* (1977–1994). This area extends from Franz Joseph Land and Novaya Zemlya south to Kuwait, west to the southwest corner

of Morocco, and north to Iceland, Jan Mayen, and Spitsbergen, including the Azores, Madeira, and Canary Island groups.

All species are illustrated in color, but that is only the beginning. Many are shown in flight, at rest, as adults and juveniles, from above and below, and in several racial forms as appropriate. About 600 of the species covered breed in the area and the rest occur only seasonally or are vagrants. Although a vagrant may have occurred only once or twice, its plumages are covered thoroughly, usually in an illustration dropped in the text, and typically with several images. Vagrants that occur with some frequency are included on the plates with the local species. To provide a perspective on the breadth of coverage, the 33 plates depicting 60 species of jaegers, skuas, gulls, terns, and alcids contain no fewer than 480 images and include at least 12 species that are vagrants from North America or Asia. Two plates and 29 images are devoted to the recently-split Yellow-legged (*Larus cachinnans*), Heuglin's (*L. heuglini*), and Armenian gulls (*L. armenicus*) alone. Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*) has only occurred two or three times, but it rates eight images including both pale and dark morphs, perched and in flight, and even the rare rufous variant. The plates are supported by detailed discussion of identification criteria and comparisons between similar species in the text, including mention of racial populations where current taxonomy is in doubt or where geographical variation is significant.

The same lavish treatment is given every group, including sandpipers and plovers. A high percentage of the shorebird species known for eastern North America is depicted on the plates right next to the most similar Western Palearctic species. Even Eskimo Curlew is there (*Numenius borealis*). Indeed, species such as Semipalmated (*Colidns pusilla*), Least (*C. minytilia*), Western (*C. mouri*), Baird's (*C. bairdä*), White-rumped (*C. fuscicollis*), Stilt (*C. himantopus*) and Pectoral (*C. melanotos*) sandpipers and the two dowitchers are treated more fully than in all but specialized shorebird guides. If anything, Western Palearctic species are even more fully treated. For those with a virtual field-identification death-wish, there are two plates with 32 images of *Phylloscopus* warblers that give new

meaning to the notion of confusing (and virtually inseparable) species, including five forms of Chiffchaff (*P. collybita*) that may be made separate species someday.

Though the greatest wealth of detail is reserved, appropriately, for local species, North American birders will be impressed with the description details provided for North American vagrants. Six species of thrushes, 22 wood warblers, 2 tanagers, 15 emberizids, and 5 icterids are covered exhaustively, for example. In addition to critical field marks, variations associated with age or sex, voice, and preferred habitat in each species' natural range are covered in detail, just the same as for local birds.

The taxonomy is relatively conservative and current to about 1995, a significant achievement itself when dealing with so many species. However, the authors have carefully called attention to many races that may be elevated to full species rank in the future: Taiga and Tundra Bean Goose (*Anser fabalis* ssp.), two or more forms of Brant (*Branta bernicla*). Common and Black scoters (*Melanitta nigra* ssp.), Pharaoh Eagle Owl (*Bubo bubo ascalaphus*), two or more Yellow Wagtails (*Motacilla flava*), Moroccan Wagtail (*Motacilla alba subpersonata*), Sykes' Warbler (*Hippolais caligata rama*), the Chiffchaffs mentioned above, and others.

There are brief but excellent introductory sections outlining the content of the species accounts, defining terms, and commenting on the techniques and pitfalls of field identification. Full indices of English and scientific names are provided. There are also appendices of 14 recent additions with full descriptions, another of 50 species intentionally omitted, and an appendix listing other important distribution and identification references for the area covered. As is inevitable in a publication of such size, there are occasional typographical errors, but I noted only three or four in studying the book for over eight hours. Each of the illustrators has done superlative work, and though every plate can be called "good", in this reviewer's opinion there are a few plates that are less successful than others at capturing a vibrant, lifelike quality to the images.

It is easy to lapse into superlatives after only a short acquaintance with this book. It

weighs about five pounds, and at two inches thick it is too large and heavy to fit conveniently in the pocket of a field jacket. But most active North American birders will want to have it, despite the high price, even if they

do not always carry it with them. It sets a new high standard for the part of the world it covers, a standard not yet met or even closely approached elsewhere. Highly recommended.—ALLAN R. KEITH.