

Reviews

**COLLINS FIELD GUIDE –
BIRDS OF THE
PALEARCTIC:
PASSERINES**

By Norman Arlott.
HarperCollins, London, 2007.
240 pages; 80 colour plates;
numerous distribution maps.
ISBN 978-0-00-714705-2.
Hardback, £25.00.

This is the first guide to attempt to cover the whole Palearctic region and it was with some excitement that I awaited my review copy. After a brief introduction and short sections on the geographic area and species covered, nomenclature, identification and bird topography comes the real substance of the book – 80 colour plates with relevant texts facing each species. Distribution maps occupy the remaining 48 pages.

There is still much debate over the southern boundary of the Palearctic region and in this book the author follows the boundary adopted by Beaman, thus including the whole of Arabia. I found the inclusion of all American vagrants a little odd, especially as some of this space could have been utilised more usefully to give further details on some eastern species for which

there is currently little available information in field-guide format.

The approach to taxonomy is very conservative. Despite the author's claim that most major subspecies are illustrated, there is, for example, no mention of races of Subalpine Warbler *Sylvia cantillans* or Orphean Warbler *S. hortensis*, even though the latter is now generally recognised as comprising two different species. On the flip side, however, the wagtail plates usefully illustrate the head and upper bodies of males of ten subspecies of *flava* and eight subspecies of *alba* wagtail.

The plates are inevitably a little crowded and are limited to adult plumages only. They are of variable quality but many of them are very good. I particularly enjoyed drooling over the chats and thrushes (Turdidae) but was disappointed by the *Phylloscopus* warblers. Sadly, I suspect that the author has been let down by the colour reproduction in places.

The text is quite limited and comprises short sections on field notes, song/call and habitat. The field-notes section is particularly disappointing and really lets the book down. Although space is tight, many texts will offer little or no help in trying to resolve an identification. For example, we are

told that Sky Lark *Alauda arvensis* forms winter flocks while Oriental Lark *A. gulgula* is more secretive than Sky Lark; and that Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii* is very similar to Richard's Pipit *A. richardi* but walks a little bit more horizontally. This space could have been used so much more effectively, even if it gave just one useful pointer on how to separate species from their close congeners. In essence, the reader is left to try and distinguish structural or plumage differences solely from the plates. When it comes to more complex groups, e.g. *Bradypterus*, *Cettia* or *Phylloscopus* warblers, the weakness of the guide becomes readily apparent.

This is a surprisingly slim volume for subject matter covered, and the cost. In my view, a real opportunity has been lost. Even at double the size it would have been small enough to take into the field and yet so much more space would have been available for illustrating important juvenile/first-winter plumages and delivering more useful identification texts.

Notwithstanding these comments, it is a considerable achievement for one man to have produced both the texts and illustrations and Norman Arlott should be congratulated on this.

If you enjoy browsing through books to remind yourself of what you have seen, or dream of what you might one day get the opportunity to see, then you will undoubtedly enjoy this book which brings so many of these species together for the first time. If, on the other hand, you are hoping to use this book as a field guide, then I am afraid it would fall woefully short in much of the region that it covers.

I love to browse and dream, however, so I for one look forward to the accompanying volume on non-passerines, which is apparently in production.

BIRDS IN A VILLAGE: A CENTURY ON

By Brian Clews. Wildguides, Old Basing, 2006.
132 pages; colour and black-and-white photographs.
ISBN 978-1-903657-15-7. Hardback, £14.50.

W. H. Hudson, who died in 1922 at the age of 80, was a prolific author who wrote much about the English countryside and its birds. His many books include *Birds in a Village* (1893), to which Brian Clews decided to add what he terms 'response chapters' to reflect the changes that have taken place in the same village during the intervening century. This is an interesting idea, though one that fails to work, in my opinion, because the so-called 'response chapters' do not match the quality of Hudson's original text. The employment of a good copy-editor would have eliminated many of the obvious irritations, such as the unlikely statement that 'dozens [of people] had fainted' [sic] in the heat of a recent summer at the Wimbledon tennis tournament.

Pete Combridge

Paul Harvey

**MANX BIRD ATLAS:
AN ATLAS OF BREEDING
AND WINTERING BIRDS
ON THE ISLE OF MAN
APRIL 1998 TO MARCH 2003**

By Chris Sharpe (principal editor),
Liverpool University Press,
2007. 389 pages; numerous
line-drawings and colour maps.
ISBN 978-1-84631-039-3.
Hardback, £60.00.

With fieldwork for the BTO/IWC/SOC Bird Atlas getting underway this winter and a number of local atlas projects starting up in tandem with the UK and Ireland project, there will be a great deal of interest in the publication of this atlas of the birds of the Isle of Man. In the preface, David Gibbons, organiser and principal author of the last BTO/IWC/SOC Atlas, declares that 'there is little doubt that this project is fast becoming a world leader among bird monitoring and survey work of this kind.' Anyone taking a quick glance through this heavy tome and seeing the detailed and professionally presented colour maps will soon be of the same opinion. This is clearly a production that many will be aspiring to for many years to come.

This goal may, however, be beyond the reach of many. The Manx Bird Atlas project is unusual for our islands in that it was run almost completely by paid surveyors working to a very precise methodology and organised to an almost military precision. For instance, all breeding season fieldwork was conducted only on dry mornings during the period from just after dawn until mid morning, and only on days when wind speed

was below force 4 on the Beaufort Scale. Visits were timed (two hours) and restricted to single 1-km squares. The location and activity of every bird using the square was mapped and the data transcribed onto a new map after the fieldwork before being entered onto a computer database which included rigorous checks to ensure that nothing was lost. Colony counts were made separately so as not to compromise the optimum time of day for fieldwork. Additional data on scarcer species were also taken account of to ensure the most accurate distribution maps. With conditions such as this, the organisers were as sure as they could be that the best total number of each species found was compiled and, most importantly, the methods are so robust that they can be repeated in the future and produce highly comparable results. Oh for such conditions for most local and national atlas projects!

But what of the actual book? After introductory chapters, which include details of habitats on the island, the history of the project and the methods used, the bulk of the book consists of the expected species accounts. These follow the usual standard atlas format, with an attractive line-drawing above detailed text and a fact box indicating seasonal presence, population estimates and statistics, plus (for most breeding species) a pair of maps comparing distribution at 5-km square level in 1977–81, taken from the *Birds of the Isle of Man* (Cullen & Jennings 1986), with that in the present survey. A page of between one and four maps faces the text. I was pleased to see that the text follows a standard sequence, which usually includes a description of the maps, naming sites and

areas – this helps to bring the maps to life for those familiar with the island or those who wish to understand the avifauna better. One significant feature of this project is the production for the first time of both summer and winter population estimates for all species occurring on the island. The robust methodology means that these estimates are also robust and reliable.

Of course, the key feature of an atlas is the maps, and in this publication they cannot be faulted. For many species there are four maps. One or two distribution maps use coloured squares at the 1-km level to show summer and/or winter presence; the summer maps also use coloured dots on top of the squares to indicate breeding status (possible, probable or proved breeding). Then there are usually one or two abundance maps using coloured shading of the type we are now familiar with from the BTO/IWC/SOC 1988–91 *Breeding Atlas*, but here of course the scale is much finer allowing great detail. The flat low-lying plain in the north of the island consistently holds the greater abundance of many species. The colours chosen are pleasing to the eye but some may cause problems for colour-blind readers. All maps have a background showing the relief of the island, which is very helpful in interpreting the results.

This new atlas offers a definitive and reliable statement on the breeding and wintering avifauna of the Isle of Man. It is not cheap, but I would nevertheless recommend it to anyone familiar with the Isle of Man and also to those interested in local atlases. There is much to be learnt from this book.

Mark Holling

**WHERE TO WATCH
MAMMALS IN BRITAIN
AND IRELAND**

By Richard Moores.
A&C Black, London, 2007.
295 pages; many line-drawings
and maps. ISBN 978-0-7136-
7161-2. Paperback, £16.99.

Not being very knowledgeable about mammals, I looked at this little book with interest. Its format will be familiar to those readers who know the regional bird equivalents, beginning with an introductory section that covers aspects such as Conservation, Mammals & the Law, and Equipment. I found

the section on Fieldcraft interesting. In an era when, for many birders, this seems to comprise remembering to put the pager in your pocket and the 'sat-nav' in the car, and then looking for a crowd of telescopes all pointing in one direction, I read sections on Patience and Stealth with some-

thing akin to nostalgia! For the mammalian tyro, this is followed by a valuable section on the groups of mammals and their identification in the field. Reading about identifying bats (Chiroptera) from their 'slaps, clicks, ticks, tocks and warbles' (you need an electronic detector) made me appreciate once again that birds are diurnal.

The main part of this book

comprises details of 215 sites in Britain, with information on access, habitat and target species for each site, plus a list of the commoner mammals that also might be found. For many of these sites there are sketch maps and, for those sites that I know, these look pretty good. However, the pages discussing Ireland are a bit thin, mostly limited to a list of cetacean sites.

All in all, I think this is a useful and informative little book that will certainly provide you with an idea of how to maximise your chances if (like me) you have never seen a European Polecat *Mustela putorius* or a Pine Martin *Martes martes* in the wild, or want to renew acquaintanceship with a Wild Cat *Felis silvestris*.

David Parkin

THE LAPWING

By Michael Shrubbs.
T & AD Poyser, A&C Black,
London, 2007. 232 pages;
colour photographs; line-
drawings by Robert Gillmor;
many maps, graphs, tables, etc.
ISBN 978-0-7136-6854-4.
Hardback, £40.00.

My goodness, I never thought that I would be reviewing a book on the (Northern) Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* more than 50 years after I wrote my own (*The Lapwing in Britain*, Brown & Sons, London & Hull, 1953). Mine remained the standard work up to at least 1987 (Peter Weaver, *The Lapwing*, Shire Natural History Series, Aylesbury) but it is now superseded.

A good athlete must feel a twinge of regret when he sees his national record broken, but at the same time he rejoices at the

progress of his sport. And so it is here: I congratulate Mike Shrubbs and his publishers on a superb book.

Detailed and thorough are words that spring to mind, yet it is very readable, especially in those sections where the author draws upon his lifetime experience as a farmer. He has a real affection for his Lapwings, and it shines through. The illustrations – mostly by Robert Gillmor – complement the text and are a delight in themselves.

On one point of detail, I'm sorry that very little attention is given to the Lapwing's remarkable adaptation of assembling on industrial rooftops, for this is how thousands of them now spend half their time for half the year across much of northern England. People are apt to call these assemblages 'roosts', which is not exactly true: they are refuges where the birds while away their time during the day, as gulls (*Laridae*) also often

do. The roofs have to a large extent replaced reservoir edges, a habitat now almost lost to Lapwings through increased use for public recreation.

A great deal of fieldwork is reported on, both in Britain and abroad, some of it completely new to me; for example, the revelation that Lapwings are by no means always monogamous. Indoors, so to speak, I have waited for years to see someone analyse the BTO nest record cards for Lapwing. Mike Shrubbs has now done that, with rewarding results.

I hesitate to mention the book's price, but £40.00 was a full month's wages in my day and it still seems rather high. I do also have to say that this is not a book for the beginner, though for serious ornithologists and, of course, for Lapwing enthusiasts, it is absolutely essential.

K. G. Spencer

**ARCTIC FLIGHT:
ADVENTURES AMONGST
NORTHERN BIRDS**

By James McCallum.
Langford Press, Peterborough,
2007. 180 pages;
numerous field sketches.
ISBN 978-1-904078-26-5.
Hardback, £38.00.

James McCallum is a Norfolk-based wildlife artist whose work is already known and appreciated by many who have seen his several books and exhibited work. His work is almost exclusively executed in the field in a

quick-fire manner and, unsurprisingly, he lists Eric Ennion and John Busby, among others, as influences on his style. Earlier in his career, his creative work occurred in tandem with wardening duties on Blakeney Point, and his ability to work outside oblivious of time and discomfort has held him in good stead for the adventures disclosed in this book.

Like very many of us, he has been fascinated by the wintering and passage waders and wildfowl of East Anglia and dreamed of joining them on their summer sojourn. Like very few of us, he made that leap through a series of fortunate chance meetings to do just that.

Not once but four times he has 'summered' in the north, with prolonged trips in Scandinavia, Alaska and eastern Siberia, sometimes joining research teams, where by virtue of almost continuous daylight he combined research with drawing (when did he sleep?).

Each trip account begins with an introduction by a companion or 'trip fixer', who explains the circumstances of each expedition; all of these allude to the intensiveness of James at work, and the surprise at both volume and quality of the work produced in the harsh and testing conditions of the Arctic. James's own texts then explain more

about the birdlife, liberally interspersed by his sketches, which help to tell more. In both word and art it is mouthwatering, our winter birds on their breeding grounds in unbelievable species combinations and doing amazing displays. The book is both fascinating and delightful.

The sketches themselves are of course not highly detailed in a

feather-by-feather way, but have a kind of detail of their own; they capture the essence by uncluttered economy, often a sure bold line fleshed out in swift watercolour. A confident flow of co-ordination between brain, eye and hand assures that most hit the spot.

For nearly all of us James's sketches are the nearest and nicest

way we will ever get to seeing the minute-by-minute life of a newly acquainted Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Eurynorhynchus pygmeus* pair, or a Solitary Sandpiper *Tringa solitaria* chick leave the nest. If you enjoy the spontaneity of field-sketch art, this is a book for you.

Alan Harris

IMAGES FROM BIRDING

By Michael Warren. Langford Press, Peterborough, 2007.
168 pages; colour paintings and sketches.
ISBN 978-1-904078-24-1.
Hardback, £38.00.

Many of you will know Mike Warren from the British Birdwatching Fair, cutting a fine artistic figure alongside his easel, pondering the next brushstroke on his latest painting – always willing to chat about birds, painting and the current predicament of a dodgy Midlands football team. Many more of you will also know of him through his beautifully intricate paintings that graced some of the covers of *Birds* magazine between the 1960s and 1980s and an article in *Birds* by Nicholas Hammond – in the good old days when the RSPB magazine had room for both artwork and photos.

An artist who birds or is it a birder who paints? Let's settle for bird artist. Warren has many times had to face the dilemma of whether to stay

in one place painting and miss something in the next hedge, or keep going and not satisfy the creative urge. This is overcome by carrying a small sketchbook at all times and making rapid studies of birds both common and rare; sometimes they are captured with just a few pencil marks. With sketchbooks brimming with ideas and images, the seeds are sown for future paintings. This fascinating process forms the concept to *Images from Birding* and has been reflected throughout, with a very pleasing layout of little field studies set alongside studio paintings.

In some ways, the book could be described as a bird-artist's field guide; the paintings of birds follow the old Voous order, so it's simple to dip into the right pages to see if your favourite bird has been captured in watercolour. It is almost impossible to select the painting I would most like to see on my wall, because my fancy changes with each browse through the book – though I do fall for the Wrens *Troglodytes troglodytes* on pages 114–115 and the Goldcrests *Regulus regulus* on

page 140 every time.

OK, it's a fair cop, I'm an unashamed fan; but then it is very difficult not to be. Mike is a master of composition and design, but the skill that puts his paintings onto another level is his ability to place the bird naturally into its habitat, without it looking as if it was shoe-horned in – check the Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* on page 135 and Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus* on page 77 in this respect. His texts are straightforward and as a rule he lets the pictures do the talking, but I did enjoy the little dig at BBRC for not approving one of his records (a White-billed Diver *Gavia adamsii* on Anglesey in 1963)!

Again, those at Langford Press deserve to have praise heaped upon them for maintaining the high standard they have set with this series of sumptuous volumes. Judging by their latest catalogue, I won't be stuck for things to put on my next Christmas list.

Dan Powell

THE ISLES OF SCILLY

By Rosemary Parslow. Collins New Naturalist, London, 2007.
450 pages; many colour photographs and illustrations.
Paperback ISBN 978-0-00-220151-6, £24.99.
Hardback ISBN 978-0-00-220150-6, £34.99.

The surname 'Parslow' (John and Rosemary) is synonymous with wildlife in Scilly, and Rosemary in particular is an expert of the flora and skilled in her knowledge of the fauna of the islands. I doubt that there is another person as well

sued as she is to the task of composing a book about Scillonian natural history. She has visited the islands annually since 1958, initially as a junior scientific assistant at the British Museum of Natural History, but now as a tour leader sharing with others her encyclopaedic knowledge of the natural history of the islands. Rosemary has now condensed this knowledge into a wonderful new book to share it with a wider audience. The New Naturalist series aims 'to interest the general reader in the wildlife of Britain by recapturing the enquiring spirit of the old naturalists'. Rosemary is one of those

enquiring naturalists and she achieves that aim to perfection.

The book comprises 17 chapters. After an insightful introduction, the next three chapters deal with history. Chapter 2 covers geology, and includes a fascinating section about the submergence of Scilly as water levels rose, transforming what amounted to one main island 2,000 years ago into the multitude of islands and islets that we see today. Chapter 3 looks at people and their influence on the islands from medieval times, with particular reference to material transformations that have created the modern-day landscape of Scilly.

Chapter 4 introduces Scilly's naturalists, from the generalist Robert Heath in the mid 1800s to the specialists of today. We learn that there have been many interesting characters involved over the years, who between them have amassed and published a wealth of information about the natural history of Scilly.

The next three chapters focus on the islands: St Mary's; the so-called 'off-islands' – the four remaining inhabited islands of St Agnes, Bryher, Tresco and St Martin's; and the uninhabited islands. These chapters provide a general introduction to the complexion of the islands, for the most part in terms of habitats and the main flora and fauna to be found, and scenes and habitations to be witnessed. By this stage of the book, the reader has developed a sound understanding of many facets of Scilly that facilitate a full appreciation of the details of flora and fauna to come.

Six subsequent chapters are systematic in their coverage of the main types of habitat in Scilly and their flora, the wildlife that frequents these habitats, and key issues that affect habitat and wildlife alike. For example, the islands' economy has drastically influenced the habitats, and the bulb fields, dominant for many years, have provided ideal conditions for the growth of interesting/rare species of flowering plants, which are presented in a systematic list. The bulb industry is now in decline, threatening some of these rare plants. Scilly's climate

permits native and many introduced plants to coexist side by side as it allows frost-sensitive flora to survive, and human habitations may be swathed in palm trees and other exotics. The main habitat types covered in these chapters are the sea and marine environment, the coast, grassland and heathland, woodland and wetland, cultivated habitats, and gardens.

Chapters 14–16 deal with the insects and other terrestrial invertebrates, mammals, reptiles and amphibians, and birds. These chapters are not intended to be all-inclusive and far-reaching, but they do provide an interesting introduction to the main species and are clever in highlighting those which are of particular interest and, depending on season, may be seen by a keen-eyed visitor to Scilly: Hummingbird Hawk-moth *Macroglossum stellatarum*, Clouded Yellow butterfly *Colias croceus*, 'Scilly Bee' *Bombus muscorum scyllonius*, Scilly Shrew *Crocidura suaveolens*, Grey Seal *Halichoerus grypus*, Puffin *Fratercula arctica* and Hoopoe *Upupa epops*.

Finally, chapter 17 looks to the future. There are numerous topics of concern that need to be dealt with, even in a 'feel-good' book such as this, and Rosemary explores the medium- to long-term issues of sea-level rise and climate change, together with the here-and-now issues of housing, tourism and wildlife, changing farming practices and introduced species. She is pragmatic rather than pessimistic about

the future, understanding that change is inevitable and that there have been losses (e.g. the recent loss of Roseate Tern *Sterna dougallii* as a breeding species) and there may be gains, albeit by way of introductions. As the author recognises, 'there is still a community of people on the islands and none of them would appreciate living in a museum'.

The 209 illustrations are spread evenly throughout the volume, exactly where needed and not clustered in the middle or at the end. This must increase production costs and Collins is to be applauded for bucking the publishing trend of profit maximisation by producing a book within the spirit declared for the New Naturalist series. Depicting classic scenes, landscape, flora and fauna, there are many contributions by well-known bird and wildlife photographers (although the author's own material is of equal standing), while artwork of wildlife by celebrated Scilly veterans Ian Wallace and Ren Hathway animate what is already a lively text.

Come on – treat yourself to this wonderful book about the natural history of the Isles of Scilly. The book wraps up Scilly between its covers and permits you to take the islands back home, where you can open the covers and release and experience the wonders of Scilly in your living room again and again and again.

Robert L. Flood

ALSO RECEIVED

SOUNDS OF THE BRITISH COASTLINE: A JOURNEY IN SOUND ALONG THE SHORES OF BRITAIN

British Library Sound Archive, 2007. Single CD, playing time 70 minutes. ISBN 978-07123-0533-4. £9.95.

RSPB CHILDREN'S GUIDE TO BIRDWATCHING – 2ND EDN

By David Chandler and Mike Unwin. Christopher Helm, A&C Black, London, 2007. 128 pages;

many colour illustrations and photographs. ISBN 978-0-7136-8795-8. Paperback, £6.99.

A PHOTOGRAPHIC GUIDE TO BIRDS OF PERU

By Clive Byers. New Holland, London, 2007. 144 pages; 252 colour photographs. ISBN 978-1-84537-613-0. Paperback, £7.99.

RSPB POCKET GUIDE TO BRITISH BIRDS

By Simon Harrop, illustrated by Dave Nurney. Christopher Helm, A&C Black, London, 2007. 192 pages; almost 750 colour

illustrations; 174 colour distribution maps. ISBN 978-0-7136-8707-1. Paperback, £4.99.

WHERE TO WATCH BIRDS IN THE WEST MIDLANDS – 3RD EDN

By Graham Harrison, Steve Coney, Frank Gribble, Helen J. Griffiths and Jim Winsper. Christopher Helm, A&C Black, London, 2007. 344 pages; numerous maps, line drawings. Covers almost 90 sites or areas in detail; fully revised and updated. ISBN 978-0-7136-6419-5. Paperback, £16.99.

This unique and spectacular handbook is the most complete and comprehensive photographic guide to the passerines of the Western Palearctic. Written by two of the world's most respected ornithologists, Hadoram Shirihai and Lars Svensson, it contains the most up-to-date information available on bird identification covering all aspects of plumage, moult, ageing and sexing, with sections on voice and other identification criteria, and detailed taxonomic notes.Â Detailed, authoritative accounts from two of the biggest names in the field, with splendid photographs of the Western Palearctic birds, their varieties, ageing and sexing.Â His other works have included senior authorship of the highly acclaimed Collins Bird Guide (HarperCollins) and numerous identification papers.