



Reviews

Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. The Birds of the Western Palearctic. vol. VI: warblers. By S. Cramp et al. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992. 728 pages; 31 colour plates; numerous line-drawings. ISBN 0-19-857509-2. £75.00.

When reviewing a book as large and important as volume 6 of *BWP*, it is difficult to know where to begin. The presentation of the work is up to the high standard expected from Oxford University Press and, of course, it matches the rest of the set in your bookcase.

Having stated the obvious, what is the content like? My major birding interest is identification, so I shall confine my comments to the plates, field characteristics and the 'small print', including plumage, moult and geographical variation. OUP could have printed the sonagrams upside-down and I would not have a clue.

The first thing that readers will notice is that there are very few plates. Volume 2 had 52 pages of plates for 104 species, whereas volume 6 has only 16 pages for 63 species. There are only three birds each of Ménétries's *Sylvia mystacea* and Cyprus Warblers *S. melanothorax*, and four each of Lesser Whitethroat *S. curruca* and Rüppell's *S. rüppellii* and Spectacled Warblers *S. conspicillata*. So, there are not enough, but what is the quality like? In my opinion, it is variable. The illustrations of *Locustella*, *Acrocephalus* and *Sylvia* warblers are superb. They not only augment the text, but are also so detailed that they can be used alone by those people who find it easier to take in information visually than by the written word. Ian Lewington's birds are perhaps generally a little too rufous, while Alan Harris's could be 10-20% bigger but this is mere carping. I think that the *Phylloscopus* warblers are a bit disappointing.

There are several inaccuracies: the fore-supercilium of the Two-barred (Greenish) Warbler *P. plumbeitarsus* is wrong; the median coverts are tipped pale on both first-autumn Greenish Warblers *P. trochiloides*, whereas even the text says that is a rare feature; the Yellow-browed Warblers *P. inornatus* do not have the right jizz; while no structural distinction is shown between Raddle's *P. schwarzi* and Dusky Warblers *P. fuscatus*. That brings me to the *Hippolais* warblers by Ian Wallace, which will, I suspect, be controversial. To my eyes, he has made little effort to change his impressionistic style for one more suited to a book destined to be one of the most important identification works of the foreseeable future. His paintings are, as always, evocative, but they do not provide the detailed and accurate plumage guide that most readers will expect.

The most important part of *BWP*, for me, is 'Field Characteristics'. Here, Wallace uses his outstanding ability to portray birds in words. The descriptions of Booted *H. caligata*, Blyth's Reed *Acrocephalus dumetorum* (including the oft-ignored rusty-toned juvenile) and Marsh Warbler *A. palustris* could not be beaten, while even the comparatively unknown Mountain Chiffchaff *P. sirdianus* gets a detailed and accurate account. I was disappointed, however, to see no mention of some of the more recent identification points; for example, the shape of the loreal part of the eye-stripe of Greenish Warbler and some of the more detailed features separating Lanceolated *Locustella lanceolata* and Grasshopper Warblers *L. naevia*. These are, however, usually picked up in the plumage descriptions. The greatest disappointment, for me, was the exclusion of Two-barred (Greenish) Warbler from the species accounts, although I understand that the contents were planned before the first one turned up in the Western Palearctic.

The detailed 'Plumage Descriptions' are up to the usual standard and are an important reference (if somewhat difficult to decipher), while the sections on 'Moult' and 'Geographical Variation' have already exposed gaping holes in my knowledge. The text includes several out-of-place brackets and one or two minor misprints which are not major detractors, but may at first baffle readers, particularly on the plate of Thick-billed Warbler *A. aedon*.

This volume is worth buying, but I cannot help wondering whether the lack of plates has something to do with the fact that potential purchasers are already 'hooked', having paid so much for the previous volumes. Let us hope that the next two volumes can keep up the standard of written work, but have more plates of the standard of the best in volume 6. COLIN BRADSHAW

Dunnock Behaviour and Social Evolution. By N. B. Davies. Illustrated by David Quinn. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992. 272 pages; 19 black-and-white plates. ISBN 019-85467-42. Hardback £35.00, paperback £13.50.

As a result of the intense conflict of interests between males and females, the Dunnock (Hedge Accentor) *Prunella modularis* has developed a remarkably variable mating system involving not only monogamy, polyandry and polygyny, but also 'polygynandry' (i.e. the polygamous association of more than one female and more than one male). Edmund Selous, the first ornithologist to record the peculiar cloaca-pecking behaviour of this species, once said: 'Always distrust— this is my experience in field natural history— any *pat* explanation of anything.' This could well have been Nick Davies's maxim, too, for, had he not kept an open mind during his ten-year study of this deceptively innocent-looking little bird, he may not have produced so comprehensive an account of its bizarre sex life or such a convincing interpretation of its complex breeding behaviour. In this, he was aided by the technique of DNA 'fingerprinting', which, together with binoculars and colour rings, he considers now to be an essential tool for the birdwatcher.

Davies's book, which also includes a chapter on the relation between Dunnocks and the Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*, should be read, he suggests, 'in the spirit of a detective story'. As such, and as a key contribution to the study of the behavioural ecology of birds, it can be enthusiastically recommended. Its value is increased by David Quinn's fine line-drawings.

K. E. L. SIMMONS

The Birds of Africa. vol. IV. Edited by Stuart Keith, Emil K. Urban & C. Hilary Fry. Colour plates by Martin Woodcock; line-drawings by Ian Willis. Academic Press, London, 1992. 609 pages, 32 colour plates, 2 black-and-white plates, 359 distribution maps. ISBN 0-12-137304-5. £85.00.

Ten years ago, I reviewed the first volume of *The Birds of Africa* with enthusiasm. Here, at long last, was the reference work that Africa, with its 2,000 species of birds, so desperately needed. It was aimed to complete this monumental work in just four volumes, but, with the publication of volume IV, we learn that another three volumes are now planned, so another decade is likely to pass before the series is completed. This volume expansion is easily explained. When *The Birds of Africa* was first conceived, it was thought that a general lack of knowledge of many (possibly even the majority) of the passerines would mean that a much greater number of species could be covered in a single volume. As the introduction to this volume explains, more is known about African passerines than the editors had supposed. Furthermore, the work has been gradually expanding in scope with each volume, and the species accounts getting longer. The average text length per species is now up to 1,000 words: as the editors explain, 'we thought it preferable to include as much information as possible while keeping the texts readable.'

This they have certainly done, making *The Birds of Africa* one of the easiest books of its type to work from, and to read. Compared with *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*, in which many of the texts would have benefited from more vigorous subediting, *The Birds of Africa* is user-friendly, and not spoil by trying to squeeze a quart into a pint pot. This spacious approach is carried through to Martin Woodcock's beautifully painted colour plates, which are reproduced at a size which frequently equates with life, and lets you see what the bird really looks like.

Volume IV considers some of Africa's better-known passerines, such as the swallows and martins, along with some of the most secretive and skulking forest-dwellers, such as the greenbuls and the forest robins—the altheas and the akalats. The lengths of the texts give an accurate indication of how much, or how little, is known about certain species, and anyone planning an ornithological expedition to Africa would have no difficulty working out which species require more fieldwork. Why, for example, are Prigogine's Greenhul *Chlorocichla prigoginei* and Grauer's Cuckoo-shrike *Corocina graueri* so restricted in their ranges? Hopefully, this splendid volume will inspire more fieldworkers to visit Africa, and help fill in the surprisingly few gaps in our knowledge.

DAVID TOMLINSON

Identification Guide to European Passerines. 4th edn. By Lars Svensson. Svensson, Stockholm, 1992. 368 pages; over 500 line-drawings. ISBN 916-301118-2. Paperback £25.00.

The first edition of this seminal book was published as long ago as 1970. Its author-publisher, Lars Svensson, is one of the world's great ornithologists. That a fourth edition of any book should be considered worthy of a full review is remarkable, but in this case totally justified. Originally intended mainly for ringers, breaking new ground in emphasising ageing criteria for Europe's common passerines, this book has grown and developed until it is now an essential work of reference for every birdwatcher, whether ringer, student of behaviour, census worker, migration-watcher or twitcher. Everyone with more than a passing interest in birds should have this new edition of this title on his or her bookshelves. Its pages are crammed with vital information on moult and ageing, racial separation and (more than in some of the earlier editions) specific identification. The over 500 drawings are mostly diagrams of structure or feather detail, useful these days not only for in-the-hand examinations, but also in the field, now that feather-by-feather examination is often possible with modern telescopes and the modern birders' expertise. Many potential purchasers will already own one of the three earlier editions; even so, everyone ought to have this new one. It is based on a tried-and-tested formula, and its facts have stood the test of time or, where they have not, the information is now updated or expanded. Chris Mead, the BTO's Senior Ringing Officer, rightly refers to this as 'the ringer's Bible'.
J. T. R. SHARROCK

The Secret Life of a Garden. By Stephen Dalton with Bernardine Shirley Smith. (Ebury Press, London, 1992. 160 pages. £18.99) Anyone who has seen Stephen Dalton's earlier *The Secret Life of an Oakwood* or *At the Water's Edge* will need only to be told that this is another book featuring his photographs. It is impossible to praise too highly the quality of the photographs or their reproduction in this superb book. The photographs, of birds, insects, mammals and plants, are amazing, and many are stunningly beautiful.
JTRS

La Passion des Oiseaux: guide pratique de l'ornithologue et du birdwatcheur. By Philippe J. Dubois & Marc Duquet. (Sang de la Terre, Paris, 1992. 241 pages. Paperback F150.00) Sound practical advice and up-to-date information on modern birdwatching, written with plenty of humour—but your French must be good. Includes an excellent chapter on the 'hotspots' of the West Palearctic, another on 'special birds', and a most useful colour chart. Four well-chosen mystery photographs in colour are designed to show how birdwatching has progressed (the influence and innovative ideas of *British Birds* being acknowledged throughout). Numerous apposite colour photos (some wonderful habitat shots) and paintings, line-drawings and monochromes, and a superb set of cartoons (my favourite: the birdwatching visitor to Scandinavia flat on his back, stunned at the sight of five species of owl shoulder-to-shoulder on a single branch). Every spread is illustrated in this witty and most worthy book. If you can read French, buy it (and help to support conservation in France).
DAC

A Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago. 2nd edn. By Richard Bfrench. (Christopher Helm Publishers, London, 1992. 426 pages. Paperback £25.00) Completely updated, new edition of this very thorough standard field guide.
JTRS

Birdwatching by Train: where to go in Britain. By Alison M. O. Harris & Nigel G. Harris. (Transport Publishing, Glossop, 1992. 120 pages. Paperback £5.95) How to get by train to 50 birdwatching sites which are at or close to railway stations, with a dozen or so examples of species to be seen at each. JTRS



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