Reviews


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 Menetries's Sylvia mystacea and Cyprus Warblers S. melanoleuca, and four each of Lesser Whitethroat S. curruca and Rüppell's S. rueppellii 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 Radde'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. sindanus 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 loral 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 detractions, 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_


As a result of the intense conflict of interests between males and females, the Dunncok (Hedge Accentor) _Prunella modularis_ has developed a remarkably variable mating system involving not only monogamy, polyanry and polygyny, but also 'polynymndry' (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 Dunncoks 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_


Ten years ago, I reviewed the first volume of _The Birds of Africa_ with enthusiasm. Here, at long last, is 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 spoilt 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 greenbul and the forest robins - the alethes 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 Greenbul _Chlorocichla prigoginei_ and Grauer's Cuckoo-shrike _Coracina 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_
Reviews


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 F 150.00) 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).

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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.

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The ninth, and final volume, covers 61 species including New World Warblers, Tanagers, Buntings, and other accidental species. It also features information on species additional to those described in the main body of the work, as well as indexes to the nine volumes.

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'the long-awaited sixth volume in the Birds of the Western Palearctic series. This is the essential book for anyone who has the series - or it's an opportunity to start collecting them.' Venue. John Hillaby, City Recorder. 'BWP continues to provide essential, in-depth treatment of all the birds of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. BWP gets more detailed with every volume: all the more for us to dig into and discover more reasons why we think birds are so wonderful.' Birds Magazine, Spring 1993. 'The five previous volumes of BWP, as it is widely known, have received excellent reviews and it is clear that volume 6 is of the same high standard an indispensable reference work' John Coveney, Irish Wildbird Conservancy Newsletter, Number 74, Spring 1993. Items related to Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa: The Birds of the Western Palearctic Volume VI: Warblers. ISBN 13: 9780198575092. A single volume dealing with all the species of Western Palearctic warblers cannot fail to have a very wide appeal.' Dr J.T.R. Sharrock, British Birds. 'the year's most important bird book, the 736-page 6th volume of the Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. Two more will later complete this classic, #500 authority on the Western Palearctic a necessity on every serious ornithologist's bookshelf.' Eric Hardy, Daily Post. 'the long-awaited sixth volume in the Birds of the Western Palearctic series. Find many great new & used options and get the best deals for Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa: The Birds of the Western Palearctic: v.1: Ostrich to Ducks by Oxford University Press (Hardback, 1978) at the best online prices at eBay! Free delivery for many products! Packaging should be the same as what is found in a retail store, unless the item is handmade or was packaged by the manufacturer in non-retail packaging, such as an unprinted box or plastic bag. See details for additional description. £51.30.