Reviews

THE STONE CURLEW

By Richard Vaughan and Nancy Vaughan Jennings. Isabelline Books, Falmouth, 2005. 345 pages; 19 colour and nine black-and-white photographs; maps; line-drawings and tables.
ISBN 0-9542955-6-0. Hardback, £35.00.

This is the first monograph on the Stone-curlew *Burhinus oedicnemus*, and is the product of father and daughter collaboration. Much of the work is based on their previously unpublished field observations (mostly in France) and an extensive literature search. The dust jacket states that it provides detailed and comprehensive information about the Stone-curlew and is aimed at any reader with a serious interest in birds, whether professional or amateur. Despite considerable professional and personal interest in this species, I am afraid that I had serious trouble in fighting my way through to the end.

Following an introduction to the Burhinidae family, chapters cover the Stone-curlew in ornithological literature, voice, choice of habitat, population studies, migration, social life, breeding biology, diet, Stone-curlews in captivity, declining populations and conservation.

For me, the strong points are the sections covering early writings on Stone-curlews, and the comprehensive list of references, including many papers from studies throughout the bird's range. I was also interested in the section on captive-breeding, including the results of the author's questionnaire survey of modern zoos, though this left several questions unanswered.

The presentation of information was unimaginative, with an over-reliance on tables, 75 in all. Illustrating ringing recoveries in a series of maps would have been more reader-friendly and informative than being presented with five pages of tables. Furthermore, it would have been better to replace most of the 22 pages discussing vocalisations, which include sonograms and even a table of written descriptions of the same call in different languages, with a CD with recordings of the main calls. As the authors acknowledge, 'attempts to render a bird's vocalisations into words are doomed to failure'! The quality of the maps and photographs is generally poor and it is a shame that some of the quality images of this bird, for example from Chris Knights, were not included. In contrast, I felt that the line-drawings by Juan M. Verala were evocative and enhanced the publication.

While it is good that this book features the results of work from much of the species' range, too little has been made of the published results of the detailed research carried out in the UK. For example, there is only brief mention of an impact on distribution from main roads. Research in southern England has shown that the population of Stone-curlews on farmland is about half what it could be because of traffic disturbance. This is one of the biggest impacts of roads recorded for any bird species and is surely of interest to the general reader, as well as being important in terms of Stone-curlew conservation efforts.

The challenge in any monograph is to summarise all the available information in a clear and digestible way. In doing so, it is important to identify what makes the bird stand out from the crowd. Sadly, I felt that this book fell short of this challenge.

Robin Wynde

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THE GREBES

Written and illustrated by Jon Fjeldså.
OUP, Oxford, 2004. 246 pages; 8 colour plates; numerous line-drawings and figures.
ISBN 0-19-850064-5.
Hardback £95.00.

This latest volume in the OUP 'Bird Families of the World' series sets out to describe the 22 species of grebes (Podicipedidae) that have been known to occur in the world, their taxonomy, ecology and conservation. The aim of the series is to commission world experts to synthesise the current knowledge for 'their' group of birds. These experts are usually enthusiasts for their subject and this is certainly the case with Jon Fjeldså. His infectious enthusiasm for grebes comes through strongly in the text. Not only does he know a lot about grebes, he clearly loves them too.

The text is in three parts. The first covers the morphology of grebes, their adaptations and relations to divers (Gaviidae). The second includes chapters on the biogeography and ecological distribution of grebes around the world, feeding ecology, behaviour, breeding, threats and conservation. This is followed by part 3: accounts for each of the 22 known species. All this is backed up with appendices and an extremely good bibliography.

Part 2 is excellent, providing a good basic introduction to the ecology and needs of grebes. It also contains many clues as to why we have such an impoverished breeding assemblage of grebes in the UK. Why do we have only two widespread species, with Black-necked *Podiceps nigricollis* and Slavonian Grebes *P. auritus* found at only a few sites?

Grebes are one of the most threatened groups of bird in the world with two, possibly three, of the 22 species already extinct and a further two critically endangered. Their high levels of endemism (some of the now-extinct species were found at only single sites) have made them particularly vulnerable, but they have also suffered from changes at wetland sites and persecution at times. In the past they were much prized for their 'fur' and were hunted almost to extinction in many areas.

Overall, Jon Fjeldså should be congratulated for producing an excellent book. It is the chapters on the ecology of grebes and their conservation which are the most valuable and deserve to be read widely. Grebes clearly need more friends.

Ken W. Smith

THE WHEATEARS OF THE PALEARCTIC: ECOLOGY, BEHAVIOUR AND EVOLUTION OF THE GENUS OENANTHE

By Evgeniy N. Panov. Pensoft, Sofia-Moscow, 2005. 439 pages; 133 photographs.
ISBN 954-642-226-6.
Hardback, £63.00.

Evgeniy Panov has spent much of his adult life studying wheatears in some of the most remote regions in the Palearctic, and this book is clearly a culmination of this research, written for both scientific and lay audiences. There are some nice photographs of habitats, although those of the birds themselves are of variable quality. The text has been edited by Michael G. Wilson, and is as good as you would expect with such assistance.

This proved to be a hard book to review for *British Birds* readers. It includes a lot of original data and observations on wheatears, but it is a complex and difficult read. The main part of the book comprises chapters on all the Palearctic wheatear species: Isabelline *Oenanthe isabellina*, Northern *Oe. oenanthe*, Pied *Oe. pleschanka* (here including Cyprus *Oe. cypriaca* as a race of *Oe. pleschanka*), Black-eared *Oe. hispanica* (treating races *hispanica* and *melanoleuca* as conspecific), Desert *Oe. deserti*, Finsch's *Oe. finschii*, Red-rumped *Oe. moesta*, Red-tailed *Oe. xanthoprymna* (including races *xanthoprymna* and *chrysopygia* – which Panov treats as separate species), Variable (Eastern Pied) *Oe. picata*, Mourning *Oe. lugens* (treated as a single polytypic species, rather than three or even four species as in some recent literature), Hooded *Oe. monacha*, Hume's *Oe. alboniger*, White-crowned Black *Oe. leucopyga* and Black *Oe. leucura*. There is a further chapter discussing hybrid populations of Black-eared and Pied. Each chapter follows a fairly standard format and structure, with sections on distribution and habitat, social behaviour, vocalisations, breeding ecology, biometrics, and moult and migration. Many of these are similar to sections of *BWP*, and include sonograms and some attractive line-drawings of courtship behaviour. As the title suggests, there is relatively little on identification.

The sections dealing with hybrid populations are particularly interesting, and based upon a great deal of detailed field observation. Panov argues a case for the Variable (Eastern Pied) Wheatear being a complex of two (or more likely three) taxa (*picata*, *opistholeuca* and *capistrata*) that evolved in isolation but are now in a state of flux through past or ongoing introgressive hybridisation. He draws attention to the parallels in ecology and behaviour among these supposedly ancestral taxa and Finsch's and Mourning Wheatears. It is a fiendishly complicated, but fascinating overview. He also reviews much original data relating to the hybrid zones between Pied and Black-eared Wheatears, concluding that, despite extensive interbreeding, they should still be considered separate species. He is, however, firmly convinced that the eastern and western forms of Black-eared are conspecific.

Panov speculates extensively about the evolution and relation-

ships of these wheatears. His ideas on what constitutes a species are not clear, but he stresses the weaknesses of using purely museum collections, and the importance of making direct observations of what the birds are actually doing in the field. In this, he is surely correct; it is becoming increasingly evident that such field observations can often tell us whether taxa are evolving independently and help to point us towards their taxonomic status. His conclusions regarding the relationships of the Palearctic wheatears are many and varied, and not all will be widely accepted. However, he makes several recommendations or predictions that could be relatively easily tested by DNA-sequence analysis. For example, that wheatears are a young (i.e. recently diverged) group, probably originating in Africa; that Desert Wheatear is not particularly closely related to other Palearctic wheatears; that the Cyprus taxon is not only conspecific with Pied, but may actually be its ancestral form; and that the two forms of Red-tailed Wheatear are specifically distinct, but the two forms of Black-eared are not. If ever a genus was crying out for a molecular analysis, this is it!

David Parkin

THE BIRDS OF AZERBAIJAN

By Michael Patrikeev, edited by Geoffrey H. Harper. Pensoft, Sofia-Moscow, 2004. 380 pages; 78 colour and two black-and-white photographs; distribution maps; tables. ISBN 954-642-207-X. Hardback, £65.00.

Situated on the far eastern fringe of the Western Palearctic, Azerbaijan is a country of great contrasts, with habitats ranging from the montane wildernesses of the Greater Caucasus to semi-desert lowlands, fabulous wetlands and the almost subtropical forest remnants of the far south. Despite all these attractions, the country is seldom explored by western birders and much remains to be discovered.

There are, perhaps, two main reasons for this lack of attention. Firstly, political instability has, until recently, made Azerbaijan a difficult country to visit. The break-up of the Soviet Union in 1990, followed by years of unrest, acted as a deterrent to visitors and, more importantly, made conditions extremely difficult for resident ornithologists. War with Armenia and the resulting loss of the Nagorno-Karabakh region still create problems in that part of the country, but elsewhere travel is unrestricted (although one still has to contend with bureaucratic details such as an official invitation to visit the country and pre-arranged permits to enter reserves). Secondly, there has not, until now, been a good publication (at least in English!) on the birds of the country. Shelton's *Where to Watch Birds in Azerbaijan* (2001) has been a useful introduction for visiting birders but would never claim to be a comprehensive handbook. Now, however, we have Michael Patrikeev's authoritative tome. The author lived and worked in Azerbaijan between 1970 and 1991, heading the Wildlife Section of the Ecological Centre of Azerbaijan from 1988 to 1991. It was during this latter period that he conducted intensive fieldwork in many parts of the country. Fieldwork ceased in 1991 because of the political difficulties, but work on the book continued, with a first draft being completed in 1993.

The book begins with introductory chapters that provide essential and interesting information on, for example, the geography of the country and bird conservation, but it is perhaps the section on past ornithological studies in Azerbaijan that readers will find most fascinating, as iconic names such as Gmelin, Ménétries and Radde keep appearing in the text. The species accounts occupy 253 of the 380 pages, each comprising sections on status, distribution, movement, population size, breeding, diet and mortality. A distribution map is included for all regular breeding and wintering species, and it is certainly these maps to which the reader's eye will immediately be drawn. They utilise symbols to indicate proved, probable and former breeding, shading to show main, subsidiary and former wintering areas, and arrows to give an impression of spring and autumn passage. How I wish we had had such information available when, in 2003, I spent a month in the country with the primary aim of locating Caucasian Black Grouse *Tetrao mlokosiewiczi* leks! It is, however, the maps that also indicate just how much work there is still to do in Azerbaijan with the use of many question marks and the presence of many inexplicable gaps in distribution.

This publication will provide an essential starting point for anyone with an interest in the birds of the country and wishing to pinpoint subjects and areas that could usefully be investigated. Another starting point would be the fledgling Azerbaijan Ornithological Society led by Dr Elchin Sultanov, which, with a tiny staff and the support of BirdLife International, is making sterling efforts to improve both the knowledge and conservation of the country's birds.

If any criticism at all is to be made of this pioneering work, it is that it is not as up to date as it might have been. The interlude of a decade between the first and final drafts has seen more fieldwork undertaken than is alluded to here, and a few of the gaps in knowledge have been filled, although, perhaps, without being widely published. This is a relatively minor quibble, however, and this work will become an essential companion on any birding trip to this fascinating country – although its size may preclude it being backpacked into Caucasian Snowcock *Tetraogallus caucasicus* territory!

Eric Meek

DUCKS, GEESE AND SWANS

Edited by Janet Kear. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005.
Two volumes, 908 pages;
30 colour plates; line-drawings and maps.
ISBN 0-19-854635-9.
Hardback, £150.00.

The considerable task of bringing together 165 species accounts, covering the screamers (Anhimidae) and the wildfowl (Anatidae), from 73 different contributors, for this latest work in the 'Bird Families of the World' series published by Oxford University Press, was undertaken by Janet Kear, who sadly died last year shortly after she had seen the task through to completion. As one of the contributors (of two species accounts), I can attest to her powers of persuasion, ability to nag dilatory contributors (!) and her skill as an editor.

Despite Janet's very best efforts, this project took over eight years from conception to publication, which does mean that the accounts vary in how up to date they are. There is also another, important consideration to bear in mind when reading the species accounts, which is that they are not intended to be completely uniform in treatment, as is explained in the Introduction. Contributors were allowed, indeed encouraged, to give different emphasis to the various sections, enabling them to expand on those aspects of the species' biology with which they were most familiar and, therefore, for which they probably had access to recent or unpublished information. This approach means that the scope of the text under the various sub-headings of each species account is more variable than would be found in, say, a typical 'handbook'. In addition, information that is well known and readily accessible is not automatically repeated for the sake of completeness, but is replaced by the necessary reference(s). In sum, though, allowing for the long gestation period, the species accounts comprise a highly authoritative account of the world's wildfowl, bringing together into the single work a great deal of previously unpublished or obscure material.

The book commences with a series of general chapters covering the overall biology of the wildfowl. The Introduction, written by Janet Kear, covers the close relationship between wildfowl and wetlands, before exploring the millennia-old relationship between wildfowl and Man, a particular interest of Janet's, including domestication, aviculture and culture. The next chapter, on Taxonomy and systematics, compares the different approaches of, for example, Delacour, Johnsgard and Sibley and Monroe, before settling on a modified version of Livesey's classification. The next five chapters cover wildfowl life history: Feeding ecology, Ecology of social behaviour, Breeding strategies and biology, Movements and migration, and Population dynamics. The final chapter deals with Conservation and management, which includes the depressing information that 33 species of goose or duck and one screamer are threatened with extinction, with five Critically Endangered, though two or even three of these are probably already extinct. Overall, I found all these chapters informative, well written and together providing an excellent overview of the Anseriformes.

The species accounts have the subheadings of Description, Field characters, Voice, Range and status, Habitat and general habits, Displays and breeding behaviour, Breeding and life cycle, and Conservation and threats. As already stated, the treatment is deliberately not uniform and thus there are accounts of little more than one page (c. 650 words) while a few extend to ten pages, usually species with several identifiable subspecies. Indeed, Bewick's Swan *Cygnus columbianus* has been awarded separate accounts for each of its two subspecies, nominate *columbianus* and *bewickii*, as both have been studied so fully. Conversely, Eurasian *Anas crecca* and Green-winged Teals *A. carolinensis* are treated as a single species, since the BOU's pronouncement of the split came too late, although few, if any, differences are apparent in their biology.

Every species account is illustrated with a map. Somewhat confusingly, a number of different base maps have been used, even for species with similar ranges; for example, Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis* is shown on a Mercator projection and Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra* on an oblique Hammer projection (using Britain as the centre-point). Both, of course, distort the true land shapes, but the latter, in particular, makes discerning detail in, say, western North America, extremely difficult. The details of distribution, both on the maps and in the text, often differ from other published information. Some of the species accounts in *The Birds of North America* seem to me to be more accurate.

If the variation in the accounts is duly noted, and good use is made of the bibliography, which extends to over 3,500 entries, these two volumes present a noteworthy contribution to wildfowl literature and a reference work which is unlikely to be replaced for many years to come.

And, finally, I must praise the colour plates. Very few artists have attempted to paint the entire family of wildfowl and, in my view, only one or two have succeeded in capturing the essence of the full range of species. I am delighted to say that Mark Hulme has triumphed. His paintings are not only highly accurate in feather detail, but manage to capture not just the typical stance of the bird, standing or swimming, but also the sometimes indefinable expression on the birds' faces, for example that mild, even friendly, look of a female Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*, or the rather more aggressive 'don't mess with me' stare of the Cape Barren Goose *Cereopsis novaehollandiae*. Each plate illustrates from three to nine species and, apart from a seemingly random choice of a single downy young on each plate, only adult plumages, and not always the full range of racial variation for species such as Canada Goose (recently split by the BOU to become Greater *Branta canadensis* and Lesser Canada Goose *B. hutchinsii*). They are, nevertheless, a delight to look at and add considerably to the value of this fine account of the world's wildfowl, which is a fitting memorial to its editor.

Malcolm Ogilvie

The stone curlew is a crow-sized bird with a large head, long yellow legs and relatively long wings and tail. Find out more.Â Mindful mornings. If you canâ€™t get outside, why not bring the outside in by downloading our bird song radio app? How nature can help protect our homes. Following the floods this winter, watch how one area is using nature as a natural protector. Casework. Catch up with the RSPBâ€™s own nature detectives on the case as they look to save some very special places. The Stone Curlew (Burhinus oedicnemus) is a is a medium-sized wader with a strong yellow and black beak, large yellow eyes (which give it a "reptilian", or "goggle-eyed" appearance), and cryptic plumage. The bird is striking in flight, with black and white wing markings. Despite being classed as a wader, this species prefers dry open habitats with some bare ground. It is largely nocturnal, particularly when singing its loud wailing songs, which are reminiscent of that of curlews. Food consists of

The Eurasian stone-curlew, Eurasian thick-knee, or simply stone-curlew (Burhinus oedicnemus) is a northern species of the Burhinidae (stone-curlew) bird family. Etymology. The genus name Burhinus comes from the Greek , ox, and , nose. The species name oedicnemus comes from the Greek oidio, to swell, and kneme, the shin or leg, referring to the bird's prominent tibiotarsal joints, which also give it the common name of "thick-knee". This is an abbreviated form of Pennant's 1776 coinage "thick kneed bustard". Eurasian Stone-curlew (Burhinus oedicnemus) bird call sounds on dibird.com. Breeding in Eurasia: w, sw EU; can be seen in 96 countries.Â Extinct. Burhinus oedicnemus oedicnemus. w and s Europe to the Balkans, Ukraine and Caucasus. - No. Burhinus oedicnemus distinctus. The stone curlew is a crow-sized bird with a large head, long yellow legs and relatively long wings and tail. Find out more.Â Mindful mornings. If you canâ€™t get outside, why not bring the outside in by downloading our bird song radio app? How nature can help protect our homes. Following the floods this winter, watch how one area is using nature as a natural protector. Casework. Catch up with the RSPBâ€™s own nature detectives on the case as they look to save some very special places. The stone-curlews, also known as dikkops or thick-knees, consist of nine species within the family Burhinidae, and are found throughout the tropical and temperate parts of the world, with two species found in Australia. Despite the group being classified as waders, most species have a preference for arid or semi-arid habitats. The stone-curlews , also known as dikkops or thick-knees , consist of nine species within the family Burhinidae , and are found throughout the tropical and temperate parts of the world, with two species found in Australia . Despite the group being classified as waders, most species have a preference for arid or semi-arid habitats. They are medium to large birds with strong black or yellow black bills, large yellow eyesâ€”which give them a reptilian appearanceâ€”and cryptic plumage. The names thick-knee