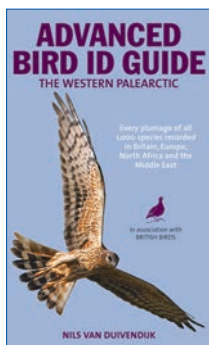


Reviews



Advanced Bird ID Guide

By Nils van Duivendijk

New Holland, 2010

Pbk, 304pp

ISBN 978-1-84773-607-9 Subbuteo code M20592

£14.99 **BB Bookshop price £13.49**

A little kitbag lives in my car boot. Spare binoculars, gloves and hats, waterproof trousers, a weathered copy of the

Collins Bird Guide and two red Silvine notebooks. The red Silvines are my version 2. Version 1 was written in about 1980 and used to live in my old waxed jacket. The idea was to have a couple of pocket-sized booklets listing all the key features for the tricky identifications and vagrants I might encounter.

My dream was that one day I would publish these little bullet-point booklets – surely others would value such a tool, the ideal accessory for the keen birder, packed with fast-tracked ID information. But I never got them published and instead Nils van Duivendijk has done something similar, only made a much better job of it. The *Advanced Bird ID Guide* is far more comprehensive than anything I had conceived and much nicer looking!

Originally published in Dutch in 2002, this guide has been extensively updated in this long-awaited English version. It covers some 1,300 species and subspecies, and it's hard to imagine more detail and data squeezed into such a well-organised, compact space. It's like no other field guide, indeed bird book of any kind, that you will have seen before. No illustrations – well, apart from two plates of comprehensive monochrome topographical illustrations near the start. The rest is text, just text.

The first impression is of a handy, compact, notebook-sized, softback book. An inviting colour front cover features a 'three-fingered' adult female harrier in flight – Pallid *Circus cyaneus* or Montagu's *C. pygargus*? These are not always easy, so I decided to check the harrier section to see how well it would perform in helping me confirm (or otherwise) my ID hunch. A quick check reveals an immense amount of data on harriers. And in less than two minutes the photo is easily assessed – yes, it's a Montagu's.

Each species section has a pink left-hand

margin highlighting which age/sex/plumage category is being discussed. Next to this, the bullet-point list of characters ranges from 2–3 lines (e.g. 'Mediterranean Storm-petrel' *Hydrobates (pelagicus) melitensis*) to 1–2 pages (e.g. Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*).

Earlier this year I was in Shetland, looking out over the seaward entrance to the Pool of Virkie, slurping tea. A shorebird caught my eye as it flew in and, grabbing binoculars, I could see that it was a Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*. A smart 'looker' with lots of black below. *BB* editor Roger Riddington came in from his office and I casually mentioned that I'd just seen a Grey Plover flying past. 'Yeah, yeah,' he said, unimpressed (a combination of earlier idle chat about what you just *might* see from this spot and my failure to appreciate that Grey Plovers, particularly sum-plum ones, are not *that* common in Shetland explained his scepticism). I tried a bit harder: 'No really, it *was* one,' I said, 'and an adult male to boot!' Actually I tagged the 'male' bit on for effect as I didn't know for sure how to tell adult males and females apart, I just had an inkling. Out came the *Advanced Bird ID Guide*: was there anything in my hunch that the bird was a male? Sure enough, I discovered, like Golden Plovers *P. apricaria*, Grey Plovers differ between the sexes in the amount of black on the underparts: fuller black on males and a little more patchy and broken up in females. I also learnt about tail patterns, crown patterns and hind toes. Much of this information is of course in other identification guides. The crucial difference is that whereas I would have looked through two or three other books over a 10–15-minute period, it took about 2–3 minutes to access the same data from 'Nils'.

I have previously worked with Nils on the very thorny subject of 'Steppe Buzzard' *Buteo buteo vulpinus* identification. So I am already familiar with his incredible attention to detail and sharp eyes. As I have thumbed through the content of his book again and again, I have discovered details about species and subspecies which are well

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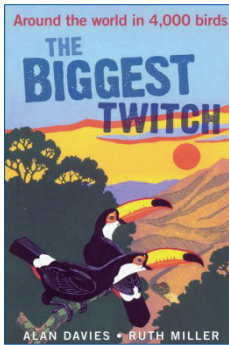
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beyond my ability ever to commit to memory. It's hard to see how it won't quickly become part of my normal kit – one for my car kitbag and one for the bookshelf at home. At such a reasonable price, too, it's likely to reduce the hesitation to purchase. So yes, *I am a fan*.

In summary, this book is the perfect answer to burgeoning libraries. A one-stop shop for bullet-point ID features from essential to quirky. It's a must-have.

Martin Garner



The Biggest Twitch

By Alan Davies and Ruth Miller

Christopher Helm, 2010

Pbk, 302pp, 16pp of colour photos

ISBN 978-1-4081-2387-4 Subbuteo code M20608

£12.99 **BB Bookshop price £11.50**

They had planned a year off, on a leisurely world birding tour. Instead, they embarked upon a gruelling marathon that saw them criss-crossing the planet for 52 weeks as they relentlessly chased a world record. When it was pointed out to Alan Davies and Ruth Miller that the late James Clements had managed to see 3,662 species in a calendar year, they accepted the challenge to beat his total. The couple sold their home, gave up their jobs and in 2008 they embarked on *The Biggest Twitch*.

The first 'big year' book was *Wild America* by Roger Tory Peterson and James Fisher, which detailed their 30,000-mile road trip in 1953, logging 572 species. It was followed by Kenn Kaufman's *Kingbird Highway* (in 1973, aged 19, he hitchhiked around North America and saw 671 species). More recent additions to the genre are *The Big Year* by Mark Obmascik (three birders competed in 1998 across North America and the winner saw 745 species) and *The Big Twitch* by Sean Dooley, who blew his inheritance chasing a species list of 700+ in Australia in 2001.

British year-list competitions seem rather pitiful in comparison, with maxima around the 380-species mark, but it's gratifying to report that two Brits have taken the 'sport' to a whole new level. *The Biggest Twitch* is subtitled 'around the world in 4,000 birds', so I'm not spoiling the ending when I tell you that Alan and Ruth smashed the world record. Indeed, they beat the Clements total with two months to go. (Incidentally, the top four world listers, with 8,400+ species on their life lists, are all British so there is one pursuit where Britons remain world beaters.)

Readers conscious of their carbon footprint should look away now. Although *The Biggest*

Twitch has undoubtedly raised the profile of the world's threatened birds, many of which ended up on the list, the participants clocked up an awful lot of air miles. The year started in Arizona before Mexico and the first trip to Ecuador. From Ecuador it was a long haul to Ethiopia and Ghana before Alan and Ruth started chasing spring migration northwards, from southern Europe to North America and back to northern Europe. At the mid-point of the year, they headed for the southern hemisphere: South America (Brazil, Argentina, Peru) and southern Africa. Then a month in Australia, a week in Malaysia, a month in India and back across the globe to Ecuador to finish the year in one final bird-rush.

The rules were simple: taxonomy followed Clements (*The Clements Checklist of Birds of the World*, 6th edn) and both Alan and Ruth had to see (or hear) a species for it to count on the list. This meant that the couple were literally inseparable for the entire year, with the inevitable tensions that would arise in any relationship of such close proximity. Remarkably there seems to have been only one major row!

Their account of the year is jointly written, with Alan and Ruth writing alternate chapters. The result is essentially a very long trip report from 27 countries with accounts of sessions in the field interspersed with descriptions of meals and accommodation. But it's compelling reading (note that the final species list is not in the book but should be available on the website www.thebiggesttwitch.com).

Two questions arise after reading this book: how much did it cost and did the couple really enjoy this rollercoaster year where sleep and food were in short supply but birds were not? The answer to the first question is £100,000 – or roughly £25 per tick. And the answer to the second

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is a definite 'yes'. Alan and Ruth saw some wonderful birds during their once-in-a-lifetime adventure and, reading between the lines, they would not refuse the opportunity to do it all again in an attempt to break their own record and maybe even log 5,000 species in a year.

This is a very good book for dark and dismal winter evenings. Put it on your Christmas list and, as an alternative Christmas party game, work out your own personal itinerary around the world.

One final thought. Hollywood has woken up to the romance/comedy potential of competitive bird racing. The film of *The Big Year* starring Jack Black and Dustin Hoffman is scheduled for release in 2011. *The Biggest Twitch – The Movie* would be a great follow-up. Perhaps Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie could play Alan and Ruth?

Adrian Pitches



Tales of a Tabloid Twitcher

By Stuart Winter

New Holland, 2010

Pbk, 206pp

ISBN 978-1-84773-693-2 Subbuteo code M20594

£7.99 **BB Bookshop price £7.00**

Stuart Winter has done birdwatchers a great service with his tabloid columns. Of all the newspapers to host a weekly birding column, the *Daily Star* seemed an unlikely pioneer. Granted, *Parus major* appear on Page 3 every day, but would 'White Van Man' embrace news stories about twitching, bird of prey persecution or the plight of the albatross?

Well, Stuart Winter has informed, educated and entertained *Star* readers – and latterly those of the *Sunday Express* – since 1994 and in so doing he's given an insight into the world of birds to a whole new audience. *Tales of a Tabloid Twitcher* is the autobiography of a Bedfordshire boy turned tabloid journalist. It's also an account of the most newsworthy events in British birding since the early 1990s.

Stuart learnt his birding in the landlocked Home Counties. His early encounter with Sir Peter Scott, when the great man crash-landed his glider on Stuart's school field, is a particularly good story, while his first trip to Minsmere, in May 1970, was a defining moment with a sighting of the ultra-rare Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*... yes, times have changed.

But as a cub reporter straight from school, and then as a news-agency hack with a young family, Stuart did not have much opportunity to indulge his birding. A rare exception was a cunning ruse to secure a job interview in Manchester while Britain's first Marmora's Warbler *Sylvia sarda* was summering across the Pennines in South York-

shire. Trudging across miles of heather in his interview suit left him rather mud-spattered and dishevelled – and the job had gone when he arrived – but Stuart saw the bird. It was one of his best days with British birds. And it provided the spark for *Best Days with British Birds*, a collection of essays by the leading birders of the day, which was published in 1989 by *British Birds*, co-edited by Stuart and Malcolm Ogilvie.

Stuart joined the *Daily Star* in 1989 and it was another vagrant bird that secured him that job. At his interview with then-editor Brian Hitchen, he was asked about his hobbies. He confessed to being a birdwatcher and said the bird he most wanted to see was the Black-browed Albatross *Thalassarche melanophris* marooned in the northern hemisphere that returned to Shetland every spring. The editor recognised that the lonely vigil of 'Albert' at Hermaness was a great story and Stuart was hired. But it was Hitchen's successor, Phil Walker, who gave Stuart his first tabloid birding column. Walker was a fellow birder but also a true 'red top' man. When asked why the *Star* had started a column about birds, he told the *UK Press Gazette*: 'It's the only way I can get more tits in the paper...'

The cover of *Tales of a Tabloid Twitcher* has a classic red masthead and offers 'Scandal! Celebrity! Intrigue!'. In truth, the biggest revelation concerns a glaring omission from Stuart's world list: he has yet to see a Puffin *Fratercula arctica*! You'll have to read the book to find out why.

Adrian Pitches

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The Peregrine, The Hill of Summer & Diaries: the complete works of J. A. Baker

Collins, 2010

Hbk, 416pp

ISBN 978-0-00-734862-6 Subbuteo code M20811

£20.00 **BB Bookshop price £18.00**

This volume is a compilation of the only two books written by J. A. Baker: *The Peregrine* (1967) and *The Hill of Summer* (1969). It has a warm and well-considered introduction by Mark Cocker, and some excerpts from Baker's ornithological diaries, selected and introduced by John Fanshawe.

Known primarily for their literary merit rather than their ornithological content, Baker's books are perhaps not what one might expect to see reviewed in *British Birds*. They are important mainly because they provide some of the acknowledged finest examples of literary prose describing British landscapes and nature, and could be considered forerunners to some of the more evocative natural history writing of today. Both books abound with beautiful and arresting descriptions of landscapes, skies and weather, as well as of bird behaviour. Most of the behaviours that Baker describes are familiar enough, but what is astonishing is the innovative and evocative way in which he brings them to life using the written word.

In his introduction, Mark Cocker tells us that J. A. Baker was an Essex man, who lived all his life (1926–87) in Chelmsford. He left school at 16, and in his working life he became the manager of the Chelmsford branch of the Automobile Association, and then later of a Britvic depot. He had a love of poetry and opera, but no known contact with writers or artists, and appears to have been rather a lone birder. Despite his job with the AA, he did not drive and was limited in his birding to areas within cycling distance of his home, centred on the Chelmer Valley and Blackwater Estuary. Only an hour from central London, this area has altered greatly since Baker's time, owing to a combination of urban encroachment and intensified agriculture. The observations on which Baker based both his books were made in the period 1955–65, the time of peak use of organochlorine pesticides, when Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus* were in headlong decline.

In compiling *The Peregrine*, Baker pooled his observations from ten winters to present them in diary style as though they were made in a single winter. This might partly explain why he would appear to have had far more frequent encounters with Peregrines than other birders of the time.

Soon after *The Peregrine* appeared, it aroused suspicions because, among many typical observations, it mentioned other things that were unexpected of Peregrines: such as birds eating worms turned up by a plough, or hovering. He also recorded the remains of 619 winter prey items, which to some seemed an ambitiously large number. Mark Cocker defends these observations, pointing out that anyone who spent so long watching Peregrines, and learnt how they used the local landscape, would almost certainly record rare events that others had missed, and learn where to look for prey remains. He comments that Baker's observations of Peregrines flying after sunset, though unknown at the time, fall little short of more recent but unequivocal evidence that Peregrines sometimes hunt at night. In general, however, Baker's descriptions of bird behaviour indicate that he was a very perceptive observer, who could well have seen things that others missed.

While *The Peregrine* was based on winter observations, arranged around one species, *The Hill of Summer* was based on ten years' worth of spring, summer and autumn observations from the same area, but is centred on no particular species. It therefore lacks the theme of the first book, and is perhaps less gripping, as it arranges observations by both month and habitat, such as the pine wood in May, the beech wood in June, the heath in July and the estuary in August.

The diary excerpts, at the end of the volume, reflect the wealth of birdlife present in this part of Essex in Baker's day, and what one could expect to see on a walk or cycle ride. It seems that Baker did not write much down at the time, but compiled his daily accounts after he had returned home, and that excerpts from these accounts were later developed into the text of his books.

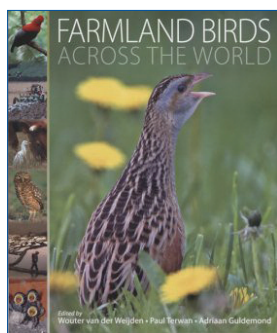
In conclusion, I feel that this volume makes good bedtime reading, not so much for its ornithological content as for the richness and pleasure of the prose, and for a taste of rural southeast England before it suffered from all the usual forms of modern-day development.

Ian Newton

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Farmland Birds across the World

Edited by Wouter van der Weijden, Paul Terwan and Adriaan Guldemond

Lynx Edicions, 2010

Hbk, 144pp, colour photographs, maps

ISBN 978-84-96553-63-7 Subbuteo code M20548

£21.99 **BB Bookshop price £16.99**

Farmland not only covers a large part of the earth's landscape, it accounts for a disproportionately high part of the land that is found closer to human habitation. This means that what most people frequently experience as 'the countryside', especially in the Old World and in more urbanised societies, is made up of agricultural land. In turn, this means that most of the birds that they encounter are, by some definition, *farmland* birds. In Britain, declines in farmland bird populations have made them a cause célèbre for conservation in the past decade or so, reflecting the cultural significance of species like Sky Lark *Alauda arvensis* and Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix*, despite the fact that the habitats and bird communities of farmland have little to do with what is really 'natural'.

This book does a great job of putting concern about British and western European farmland birds, and the bird communities themselves, in an international context. The book is well organised into chapters on different farming systems, from grassland through arable, rice and crops taken from trees, to coffee and cacao, with an additional chapter on birds in farmyards. Introductory chapters put farmland and its birds in context, while prospects for conservation and management in the

future are described in a concluding chapter.

As well as the book being beautifully illustrated with high-quality photographs, the text is nicely partitioned into a very readable main text and supplementary boxes describing specific issues, such as conservation initiatives of particular bird-farming associations. This makes the book excellent for dipping into, and it includes a wealth of information about a huge range of types of agriculture and the relationships that birds have with it, both positive and negative. Thus, areas of conservation concern are covered, but so are problems with birds as agricultural pests and the roles of birds in providing economic benefits in farming systems.

Farmland Birds across the World is basically a coffee-table book and I would not recommend it as a definitive academic review on any of the subjects it covers, but I found it very interesting and enjoyable to dip into, and a good introduction to issues from all over the world. Although wildlife in 'natural' habitats is important, of course, this book represents a timely reminder that a huge range of valuable species and communities essentially live with us and are important both as indicators of the health of our environment and in their own right.

Gavin Siriwardena

Birding Dordogne

By David Simpson

BirdGuides, 2010

Pbk, 24pp, black-and-white illustrations, maps

ISBN 978-18-98110-52-1 Subbuteo code M20694

£7.50 **BB Bookshop price £6.75**

Situated in the region of Aquitaine in southwest France, the Dordogne is superb for birding and this booklet gives six main areas to explore. Perhaps the most obvious is the Dordogne Valley itself, running some 60 km between Bergerac and Sarlat. But in the north there is the Verteillac Plain, with Little Bustards *Tetrax tetrax*, Stone-curlews *Burhinus oedicnemus*, Tawny Pipits *Anthus*

campestris, Rock Sparrows *Petronia petronia* and other flat-country birds. The Landais and Double Forests to the west of Bergerac give a mixture of pine and deciduous woodland and sandy heaths with nesting Hen Harriers *Circus cyaneus* and Dartford Warblers *Sylvia undata*. Farther south, the Lot Valley is an open stony plain near Cahors where you have the chance to find Ortolan

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Buntings *Emberiza hortulana*. Other areas covered by the booklet are the Vézère Valley between Le Bugue and Montignac with its limestone outcrops, and the Faux Plateau with its nesting Montagu's Harriers *C. pygargus* and Red-backed Shrikes *Lanius collurio*. Each site is described together with a list of target birds and an annotated map. There is also a list of 175 species that occur in the area – although this could have usefully indicated their status and in which seasons they are present.

When I first visited the Dordogne in the 1980s it involved a lengthy car and ferry journey, but now there are plenty of flights to Bergerac Airport from various UK airports. For those who want more from a holiday than just birds, the Dordogne valley has 1,500 castles and many other tourist attractions, so there is much on offer.

Keith Betton



National Geographic Bird Coloration

By Geoffrey E. Hill

National Geographic, 2010

Hbk, 256 pages, colour illustrations and photos throughout

ISBN 978-1-4262-0571-2, Subbuteo code M20812

£16.99 **BB Bookshop price £15.29**

At the time of writing, a male House Finch *Carpodacus mexicanus* of unknown origin, which was first recorded at Land's End in April in yellow plumage, is sat on rooftops at East Prawle, Devon, moulting into a more familiar red plumage. Geoffrey Hill, although more familiar in birding circles for his attempts to document the existence of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers *Campyphilus principalis* in Florida (see *Ivorybill Hunters: the search for proof in a flooded wilderness*, OUP, 2007), is a professional ornithologist who studies the control and evolution of bird coloration. One of his main study species is the House Finch, and in this book he makes a good job of showing that an understanding of how and why birds get their pigments and patterns is relevant to birders.

The stated objective of the book is to explain to non-professionals what scientists know about bird coloration. With that in mind, the text is kept simple, technical terms are explained clearly in side bars, and the whole book is generously illustrated in colour with high production standards. There are 14 main chapters, each of which covers the basics of one aspect of the mechanics and biology of pigments and colour patterns. There is a fair bit of repetition in the text, which keeps it easy to understand and which means that each chapter almost stands alone for the casual reader. Hill's writing style is easy to follow, but the book's popular style and coffee-table look belies the fact that it is up to date and packed with interesting snippets of information and facts. Few birders will not find something in here that opens their eyes to

areas of bird biology that they had not previously considered. There are boxed 'Birder's Notes' of variable usefulness throughout.

The book is written from the perspective of US-based author and audience, and many of the examples used are of Nearctic species, but nods are given to Palearctic birds when these are appropriate – for example, the studies of Robins *Erithacus rubecula* by David Lack and the long-term studies of Pied *Ficedula hypoleuca* and Collared Flycatchers *F. albicollis* in their continental areas of range overlap. There are no citations in the text and only a cursory bibliography. For further information, the reader is directed to the author's previous technical volumes, *Bird Coloration* (Harvard University Press, 2006). House Finches pop up many times throughout the book, and the reader will not have to consult other sources to understand that carotenoid pigments (yellows and reds) need to be obtained through diet, and yellow carotenoids may be converted chemically to red once eaten. A House Finch that is deficient in carotenoids (perhaps through a diet in captivity) or in poor physiological condition (maybe again through captivity, disease or a high parasite load) has yellow feathers, but if its diet or health improves it will produce red feathers at the next moult. This appears to be what has happened to the British individual. Clearly the Devonshire cream teas are good for its constitution.

Geoff Hill has produced an excellent, accessible, thought-provoking book that deserves to be read by anyone wanting to know more about the fascinating plumage patterns of birds.

Martin Collinson

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Advanced Bird Id Guide Montana Field Guide contains a wealth of information about Montana's diverse species. (Family) Upland Game Birds - Montana Field Guide This site contains photographs of dozens of North American bird species by Peter LaTourrette. North American Bird Photography Gallery This guide will help you identify you tree species in two simple steps. All you need to do is to have a close look at your tree's foliage and walk through ID my Bonsai, tree identification guide - Bonsai Empire 2019 Spring IBA Survey Season Join us for this year's exciting Spring Surveys We ha What's that bird? Merlin Bird ID helps you solve the mystery in 5 questions, or with a photo of a bird. First, Merlin asks you a few simple questions. Then, almost like magic, it reveals the list of birds that best match your description. Pick your bird, then delve into more photos, sounds, and ID tips about your bird! Merlin is the most advanced bird guide app available, and is expanding to new regions of the world. Bird Packs Merlin Bird ID currently includes bird identification help for the United States with regional packs for the: Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Rocky Mountains, Southwest, Texas and Oklahoma, Alaska, and West Coast. Canada is covered by Eastern Canada and Western Canada packs. Mexico bird identification is available for each region of the country. Advanced Bird Guide. November 21, 2014 by bridyman. Comments: 1 | Views: 15447 |. This is great when they are pulling creeps as well and you need farm. 106 Gold from the big bird is good money early game. If you are aware they are pulling creeps, be sure to send a fire spirit into the fog. For specific hero guides, refer below.