

Reviews

**HANDBOOK OF
AUSTRALIAN,
NEW ZEALAND &
ANTARCTIC BIRDS: VOL. 7.
BOATBILL TO STARLINGS**

Edited by P. J. Higgins,
J. M. Peter and S. J. Cowling.
Oxford University Press,
Melbourne, 2006.
1,984 pages; 54 colour plates;
numerous maps and
line-drawings.
ISBN 0-195-53996-6
(Vol. 7 set).
Hardback, £245.00.

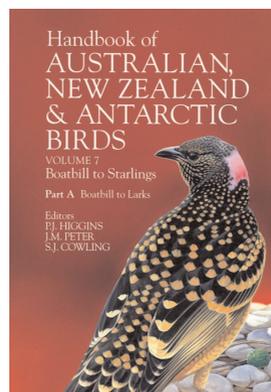
The publication of this volume, the last in the series affectionately known as *HANZAB*, brings this monumental work to a close. Like the first volume in the series, Vol. 7 is actually split into two weighty tomes (Parts A and B), each of around 1,000 pages. It covers the remaining 168 passerines, which include three endemic families, the Australian mudnesters (*Corcoracidae*), the New Zealand wattlebirds (*Callaeidae*) and the monotypic family (*Turnagridae*) represented by the extinct Piopio *Turnagra capensis*.

As would be expected, the format follows that of the previous volumes, with sections covering field identification, habitat, distribution and population, movements, food, social organisation, social behaviour, voice, breeding, and plumage and morphology. If this sounds familiar, then it's not surprising as this was the format of our own *BWP*, which provided a great impetus for *HANZAB*. As well as a combined index to all seven volumes, Part B also offers what I imagine would be useful appendices of Aboriginal and Maori names.

So, what was conceived of as a four-volume work back in 1981 has finally manifested itself as nine books, published between 1990 and 2006, covering all 957 species recorded in the region. Given the almost exponential rise in published ornithological literature relating to

the region in the last 20 years, it is little wonder that, in maintaining the very high standards set by Vol. 1, the project ended up larger than envisaged at the outset. What might come as more of a surprise to readers is the similarly exponential rise in costs associated with the project, such that by the end it became a multi-million-dollar endeavour. Peter Higgins's 'Finishing *HANZAB* – a reflection' published in Part B makes for a fascinating read. Among other things it outlines the tension within the ornithological community – those determined to complete the project and those who felt that Birds Australia (formerly the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU)) was having to sink too many resources into the project at the expense of practical conservation efforts. In the end, the project survived only through sponsorship from individual benefactors, trusts and foundations, and businesses. A list of these is given.

Vol. 7 maintains the high standards that one has come to expect of this series. The plates are of very high quality and the content accurate, up to date and copious. Having recently returned from a trip to New Zealand, I was particularly interested to read about some of its endangered species. The Kokako *Callaeas cinereus* account extends to 20 pages and that for the Saddleback *Philesturnus carunculatus* to nearly 30! In both, a full account of conservation efforts extends to giving details of numbers released at all translocation sites and the subsequent success or otherwise of the population at each of these sites. Nor is it just native species that receive a full treatment. The introduced Dunnock *Prunella modularis* receives seven pages, included in which is a detailed history of its introduction and subsequent population expansion, as well as its more recent decline. Accounts of introduced species also include, where available, summaries of any ecological or biological studies of them in



the region, which may provide interesting comparisons with those in their natural range.

The aim of RAOU/Birds Australia is to work to conserve native birds and biological diversity in Australasia and Antarctica through the study and management of birds and their habitats, and the education and involvement of the community. *HANZAB* will surely provide an important baseline for delivering this aim, and prove to be an invaluable resource in helping to achieve it. It is likely to remain the key reference to birds of this region for very many years and it compares more than favourably with any similar publication available for any other region of the world. Everyone who has been connected with this project can feel proud of their achievement and should take a well-earned rest!

Whether or not *HANZAB* will find its way onto the bookshelves of many British birders is another matter. Much of the content will be of little direct relevance and it is an expensive work. Anyone who has been purchasing each volume as it has been published will have forked out over £1,000.00 by now, and I shudder to think what the cost of all seven volumes would be if starting from scratch. Those who have taken the plunge will certainly be hoping that OUP does not start selling complete sets for sweetie money, as it did with *BWP*.

Paul Harvey

THE BARN SWALLOW

By Angela Turner.
T & AD Poyser, A&C Black,
London, 2006. 256 pages;
26 colour photographs;
numerous line-drawings.
ISBN 0-7136-6558-0.
Hardback £40.00.

Following on from the author's 1994 book in the 'Hamlyn Species Guide' series, this volume provides a far more detailed and comprehensive account of the Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*, including much new information from research carried out in the intervening 12 years.

Angela Turner's long interest in the Barn Swallow began with a study of its feeding behaviour in central Scotland in the 1970s, and the book is especially strong in describing behavioural aspects of the bird. Social behaviour is a major focus of several chapters, including the often complex interactions between adult birds in the breeding season, and the huge communal gatherings that are a feature of the species in autumn

and winter. One roost in Botswana was thought to contain 1–2 million birds; perhaps as many birds as return to Britain each spring, massed together in just 34 *Acacia* trees! An absorbing description of flight patterns, including the variety of different 'tactics' that birds use when in pursuit of flying insects, is drawn heavily from the author's own research.

Many readers will be familiar with studies of Barn Swallows that have investigated the role played by the male bird's long tail. Does this serve primarily to attract females or has it evolved mainly to improve manoeuvrability and hence foraging efficiency? Numerous field experiments have been carried out to try to resolve this question, including novel techniques such as artificially altering tail length and assessing the impact this has on foraging behaviour and mate selection. The book provides a detailed and balanced overview of this work, and highlights the differences of opinion that, perhaps surprisingly, still exist among scientists studying this intriguing subject.

Historically, the difference in tail length between the sexes is

something that Gilbert White was well aware of (despite the lack of optics in the 18th century). Yet he still believed that at least a proportion of our breeding birds remained with us through the winter, hiding in crevices or in mud at the bottom of ponds. Although we now know better, the chapter on migration and dispersal shows that we still have much to learn about Barn Swallow movements. As the author points out, it seems very surprising that for one of our best-loved and most common long-distance migrants, there has been only a single (Italian) study into how birds find their way to and from the wintering grounds.

A special mention must go to Danish scientist Anders Møller, whose name appears on the majority of pages making up this book. His research on Barn Swallows has spanned over 30 years and he is the lead author of no less than 86 of the papers listed in the book's bibliography! All in all, this is a fascinating account of what is known of this species, as well as being a thoroughly enjoyable read.

Ian Carter

BIRDS OF THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC & HAITI

By Steven Latta, Christopher Rimmer, Allan Keith, James Wiley, Herbert Raffaele, Kent McFarland and Eladio Fernandez.
Christopher Helm, A&C Black,
London, 2006. 258 pages;
57 colour plates;
numerous maps.
ISBN 0-7136-7905-0.
Paperback, £24.99.

A little over a decade ago I made my first visit to Hispaniola, armed with a copy of 'Bond' (Bond, *Birds of the West Indies*; Collins, 1985) and some birders' notes. How times have changed. Since then, a new West Indian guide has appeared in hardback and field-

guide formats (Raffaele *et al.*, *Birds of the West Indies*; Helm 1998/2003), an admirable BOU checklist covering the same ground as the present work (Keith *et al.*, *The Birds of Hispaniola*; BOU, 2003) and a field guide to Cuba for good measure. Now, we have this book, a near hybrid between the BOU checklist and the West Indian guide, for it 'borrows' many plates from the latter and leans heavily on the non-descriptive texts of the former. Overkill or an embarrassment of riches?

Before I answer that question (impatient readers may cut to the final paragraph), what does the present volume contain? Following some sensibly brief but informative introductory sections, replete with a neat map that marks the island's protected areas, there follow the plates. These rely heavily on Raf-

faele *et al.*, augmented by 105 new images by Barry Kent McKay, including several full-page plates of single endemics. Thereafter come the 302 species accounts, each subdivided into 'Description', 'Similar species', 'Voice', 'Hispaniola' (which covers records, range and habitats), 'Status', 'Comments' (mainly habits), 'Nesting' (where relevant), 'Range' (global) and 'Local names'. The level of detail is nigh faultless. Taxonomy follows the AOU with a few well-argued exceptions, most radically the removal of the endemic genera *Microligea* and *Xenoligea* to Thraupidae. Except for a few vagrants and an introduction, all species are mapped. Finally, there is a solid but not exhaustive bibliography, a checklist with tick boxes and space to annotate locality, date, etc., and a really handy site guide. Most visitors can

dispense with those birders' notes I carried, for this section sports 'hot' tips for finding virtually all the endemics.

Billed as a field guide, this book is much heavier than the same publisher's *Field Guide to the Birds of the West Indies*. If you own the latter and the brilliant BOU checklist, then I doubt that you need this

book. If you possess neither and are planning a visit, this guide is a must, and there is enough here to warrant its purchase by owners of the general field guide alone. Nonetheless, my favourite book on Hispaniola, one of the most exciting West Indian birding destinations, remains the 1931 Wetmore & Swales tome (*Birds of*

Haiti and the Dominican Republic, *US Natl. Mus. Nat. Hist. Bull.* 155). Ornithology was different then; not only were there more birds but also more habitat, and aeroplanes did not put foreign climes within such easy reach. Times really have changed.

Guy M. Kirwan

**TONY SOPER'S
BIRD TABLE BOOK**

By Tony Soper. David & Charles, Newton Abbot, 2006. 185 pages; numerous colour illustrations. ISBN 0-7153-2413-6. Hardback, £16.99.

THE GARDEN BIRD BOOK

By Sarah Whittle. New Holland, London, 2007. 176 pages; numerous colour illustrations. ISBN 1-84537-496-9. Hardback, £12.99.

Colourful and skilfully illustrated, these two books aim to provide

helpful advice to the many people wishing to make their gardens more attractive for birds.

Rather surprisingly, given that it is published in association with the BTO, Sarah Whittle's *The Garden Bird Book* is by far the least helpful. Just 13 of its 176 pages are allotted to practical advice, mainly on feeding and nestboxes, while most of the rest are filled with species accounts that contain rather too much information of questionable relevance. For example, space is devoted to identification hints; the mention of subspecies (*abietinus* Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* and *acredula* Willow Warbler *Ph. trochilus*) is

surely pointless; and the inclusion of White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* could be construed as padding! In contrast, the coverage provided by Tony Soper's cleverly written guide is notably more comprehensive, as it deals not only with the provision of food and nest-sites but also with a variety of other subjects, these including gardening for birds; ponds and their construction; and other wildlife. Thus, even though *Tony Soper's Bird Table Book* is more expensive, its consistently more pertinent and wide-ranging content ensures that the extra money is well spent.

Pete Combridge

**STRONSAY'S
'GARDEN' BIRDS**

By John Holloway. Published privately by the author, 2006. 304 pages; many photographs and illustrations. ISBN 0-9526298-5-2. Hardback, £28.00 (inc. p&xp from the author, Castle, Stronsay, Orkney KW17 2AG).

The style and format of *Stronsay's 'Garden' Birds* will be familiar to anyone who has read previous titles by the same author, which include *Fair Isle's Garden Birds* (Shetland Times Ltd, 1984). This, John Holloway's latest book, a series of accounts of finding and identifying birds on Stronsay, Orkney, is a veritable Northern Isles birdfest. Stronsay lies 65 km SSW of Fair Isle, and in the lee of both Sanday and North Ronaldsay, which should give an indication as to the species encountered in the

17 years that the author and his family have lived there. And a great many have been spectacular rarities too, albeit that most are not submitted to BBRC. This book is your chance to read all about them.

Separate sections are devoted to resident species, regular migrants, and to uncommon migrants and rarities. Liberally illustrated by the author's own inimitable colour sketches, some of the many photographs and video-grabs require a leap of faith in believing that they are what we are told they are, but one, of a male Cretzschmar's Bunting *Emberiza caesia* taken on a gloriously sunny late-spring day in 1998, indisputably shows it to be such. The documentation of the second successful breeding by Icterine Warblers *Hippolais icterina* in Scotland, in 2002, is another significant milestone. A final section of contributions comes from Stronsay residents and visitors (mainly concerning star finds or memorable ornithological

moments) to the private reserve run by the author and his wife, Sue.

Focused, harmless addiction maybe, but such is the contagious enthusiasm of the author that it is hardly surprising that the whole island population has got in on the act, something of which comes through in an engaging narrative. John is regularly tipped off about the rare/unusual/unidentified: a 'bird like a willy wagtail but bigger' turned out, of course, to be a Magpie *Pica pica* (the one and only record for the island) resulting in an 'island only' twitch for residents.

This book essentially celebrates the pleasure, anticipation and excitement of birdwatching on a small island and is dedicated to those 'field ornithologists who find and enjoy'. On Stronsay, as throughout the Northern and Western Isles, the potential exists to find that elusive rarity, often just a local rarity but sometimes one more significant.

John Holloway's unabated pleasure in birding his unique local patch is conveyed unequivocally throughout, and while the author may not quite be a latter-day Gilbert White, or indeed Compton

Mackenzie, this read is a serious 'Rarities Galore'. In that, this book is as much for birdwatchers' companions to read as for birders themselves. However, its true worth as a valuable documentary record

will, we suspect, not be realised until all too late, perhaps in an antiquarian bookshop 50 years hence.

Colin and Joy Glendenning

**RAPTORS: A FIELD GUIDE
TO SURVEY AND
MONITORING**

By Jon Hardey, Humphrey
Q. P. Crick, Chris V. Wernham,
Helen T. Riley, Brian Etheridge
and Des B. A. Thompson.

The Stationery Office,
Edinburgh, 2006. 300 pages,
numerous line-drawings,
including a CD of raptor
vocalisations.

ISBN 0-11-497321-0.
Hardback £14.99.

Although some raptor populations in Britain & Ireland are increasing, many are still well below the levels that would be expected were it not for past human persecution. Significant threats remain, including the continued persecution of some species, habitat deterioration and, perhaps, climate change. The need for comprehensive monitoring and reporting of birds of prey is as great as it has ever been.

This guide covers the 21 species of diurnal birds of prey (Falconiformes) and owls (Strigiformes) that breed regularly in Britain & Ireland, together with Common Raven *Corvus corax*, which many enthusiasts treat as an 'honorary raptor'. The individual species accounts provide a comprehensive summary of breeding ecology and monitoring techniques for each

species. One of the great strengths of the book is the wide input from raptor ecologists throughout Britain & Ireland (more than 100 contributors in all), so that the text not only summarises what is known from the literature but also includes knowledge gained from long hours in the field, some of which has not been published previously. Sources of information are cited throughout the text and the 32 pages of references at the end of the book provide a valuable resource for those seeking further detail. The accounts are broken down into standard headings so that there is welcome consistency of coverage among species.

Although most readers will no doubt quickly turn to the text covering their favourite species, the introductory chapters should not be overlooked. These describe the development of raptor monitoring in Britain, surveillance and monitoring techniques (including modern developments such as satellite-tracking and stable-isotope analysis), raptor breeding biology and the identification of raptor signs. There are also sections on licensing, wildlife crime and health and safety issues, which provide essential reading for anyone wishing to become involved in monitoring birds of prey.

The accompanying CD (tucked away neatly inside the back cover)

is much more than a gimmicky add-on, because of the amount of detail it contains. For each species there is a brief introduction which describes how vocal the bird is, followed by examples of different types of call, carefully introduced to make clear the sex and age of the bird involved (where known) as well as the circumstances in which the calls were made – for example alarm-calling at a human intruder close to the nest, or female responding to a male bringing in food. This makes it genuinely useful for prospective fieldworkers. If you thought that you were familiar with the sounds made by Tawny Owls *Strix aluco*, for example, then the five minutes allocated to this species might contain a few surprises!

The stated aim of this guide is to promote best practice in survey and monitoring work, and hence to improve the quality of the information collected each year by the dedicated body of enthusiasts who make up regional raptor groups or undertake their own individual studies. It is also hoped that it will help to encourage and inspire a new generation of raptor workers. Having spent an absorbing evening thumbing through the guide, with the CD playing in the background, I have little doubt that it will succeed in its aims.

Ian Carter

**A TIGER IN THE SAND:
SELECTED WRITINGS
ON NATURE**

By Mark Cocker.
Jonathan Cape, London, 2006.
184 pages.

ISBN 0-224-07882-5.
Hardback, £10.00.

For many years now, I have regularly bought the *Guardian* newspaper on Mondays, mainly for one reason: to read and savour the 'Country Diary', which, this year, is celebrating its centenary. Now, this attractively produced book handily collects the cream of Mark Cocker's contributions, almost all originally published in the 'Country Diary' or a similar

column in the *Guardian Weekly*.

The various writers of this immensely popular column include a brace of ornithological luminaries from Cheshire: Thomas (T. A.) Coward, the first diarist in its original incarnation as the 'Country Lover's Diary' in the then *Manchester Guardian*, and his successor, Arnold Boyd, who was also a past editor of *British Birds*.

The author of this fine collection of articles is himself an extremely able ornithologist. He is also one of our finest contemporary writers on birds and natural history, well known to many for his last two books, the incisive and witty *Birders*, and, most recently, the unique masterpiece that is *Birds Britannica*.

A *Tiger in the Sand* deals with a huge range of wildlife subjects, from mosquitoes (Culicidae) to whales (Cetacea) (and, of course, Tigers *Panthera tigris*), and natural landscapes, from Mark's homeland of Norfolk to the Galapagos archipelago (and a whole chapter on Africa). But for those whose primary passion is birdlife, there is

much here to delight; over a third of the 101 articles have birds as their major subjects, while many more include mention of others.

In these carefully honed but vivid pieces, Mark Cocker explores the intriguing interface between wild creatures and our responses to them with immense skill and perception, backed up by deep and extensive knowledge of the subject. More than mere reports from the rural front, thanks to both his keen eye for the natural wonders he observes and for his skilful choice of words in the finely crafted, lyrical prose, they evoke powerful emotions and really make one think about how we react to wildlife. And as a writer myself, I

admire his ability to encapsulate the essence of a bird in a few words, as when comparing the 'conversion from black meteor to terrestrial flesh-and-bone' of a Common Swift *Apus apus* entering its confined nest space to 'some magical sword that will enter a scabbard a third the width of its blade.'

My only criticism of this book is that it could have been twice as long. Buy it to savour through winter nights and then turn back to for continued delight – and a second copy for someone special, or as a replacement when yours is 'borrowed'.

Jonathan Elphick

**THE SOMERSET
WETLANDS: AN EVER
CHANGING
ENVIRONMENT**

By Pat Hill-Cottingham, Derek Briggs, Richard Brunning, Andy King and Graham Rix.
Somerset Books, Tiverton,
2006. 240 pages; many colour photographs.
CD with 19 tracks.
ISBN 0-86183-432-1.
Hardback, £19.99.

Having just moved home to that mysterious and beautiful part of southwest England known as the Somerset Moors and Levels, I have begun to delve into the history – and of course the natural history – of the area. Perhaps nowhere else in Britain are these two disciplines more intertwined. As this splendid volume reveals, the human history of the Somerset wetlands has had

an extraordinary bearing – sometimes good, often bad – on the area's wildlife. The good news is that, in the nick of time, the potential destruction of this unique corner of the English countryside has been halted. Thanks to enormous efforts from conservationists and naturalists, and a little help from Government, much of the wildlife is thriving again at last.

The recent trend in publishing has been towards 'niche markets', so it is very welcome to read a book with such ambitious scope: covering not only natural history, but also geology, archaeology and human history – essential to a proper understanding of Somerset and its wetlands. So in part one, 'Wetlands through Time', there are chapters on peat-digging, the legacy of which is now providing some of the best nature reserves in southern Britain; and the medieval reclamation of the moors and levels from the sea, a truly

awesome achievement by our ancestors. Part two focuses on 'Wetlands and Wildlife' – from the ecology of the Lesser Silver Water-beetle *Hydrochara caraboides*, through dragonflies (Odonata) and butterflies (Lepidoptera) (the area is excellent for both) to 'Birds in a Changing Landscape', written by the RSPB warden on the Avalon Marshes, Sally Mills. Part three looks ahead to the future of these precious wetlands. As well as covering conventional topics, such as farming and climate change, it also presents a mouth-watering vision of 'The Somerset Everglades', by Natural England's Andy King. The possibility of Dalmatian Pelicans *Pelecanus crispus* flying once again over the Somerset Levels is an enticing one. This book, and the accompanying CD of the sounds of the levels, deserves a wide audience.

Stephen Moss

SECRET NATURE OF THE ISLES OF SCILLY

By Andrew Cooper. Green Books, Totnes, 2006.
224 pages; 200+ colour photographs; maps.
ISBN 1-903998-51-4. Paperback, £9.95.

This new guidebook to Scilly contains an island-by-island guide to wildlife, together with historic sites, walks and viewpoints; it describes what to see, and where and when to see it.

THE POCKET GUIDE TO SCILLY BIRDS

By Nigel Hudson and Danni Borrett. Post Box Publications, St Mary's, 2006. 128 pages; many colour photographs. ISBN 0-9553430-0-3. Hardback, £7.99.
Available from www.booksonscilly.co.uk

An attractive and genuinely pocket-sized guide to the commoner birds of Scilly, with excellent photographs.

Higgins PJ (1999) Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic birds. Parrots to dollarbird, vol 4. Oxford University Press, MelbourneGoogle Scholar. Higgins PJ, Davies SJJF (1996) Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds. Snipe to pigeons, vol 3. Oxford University Press, MelbourneGoogle Scholar. Higgins PJ, Peter JM (2003) Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds. Pardalotes to shrike-thrushes, vol 6. Oxford University Press, MelbourneGoogle Scholar.Â Boatbill to starlings, vol 7. Oxford University Press, MelbourneGoogle Scholar. Higgins PJ, Peter JM, Steele WK (2001) Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds. Tyrant flycatchers to chats, vol 5. Oxford University Press, MelbourneGoogle Scholar. 'excellent book one of the most exciting and significant projects in Australian ornithology today and for some time to come It provides an up-to-date comprehensive and accurate synthesis of our knowledge of all the birds that occur in the region and continues the tradition of authoritative and exciting publications on Australian birds It will have an enormous impact on the future direction of research and the conservation of Australian and Antarctic birds, as much by showing what we do not know as by summarizing what we do. These illustrations are in a class by themselves and Australian Birds and Wildlife. Entertainment website. Loveless Boy. Personal blog. Wikipedia. Content from the Wikipedia article Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds (contributors) licensed under CC-BY-SA. Freebase. Content from Freebase licensed under CC-BY.