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Trogons: A Natural History of the Trogonidae

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Trogons: A Natural History of the Trogonidae.—Joseph M. Forshaw. Illustrated by Albert Earl Gilbert. 2009. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. 292 pp., 43 full-size color plates, 1 double-size fold-down plate, 28 color drawings, 8 ink drawings, 3 figures, and 39 range maps. ISBN: 978-0691141589. Cloth, $150.00.—The trogons and quetzals are among the most colorful of birds. The color pattern of males is brown or metallic green with a blue-green gloss on the dorsal region, and the head can be metallic green, black, gray, blue, violet, chestnut, pink, or red. The group encompasses 39 species distributed in tropical areas of the New World, Africa, and Asia. Trogons are considered biological indicators of forest integrity, and they have played a major role in many ancient and modern cultures. In some places it is believed that seeing or hearing these birds indicates beneficial communication from the gods. Although the natural history of some species is well known (e.g., Skutch 1942, 1944, 1948), as a group trogons are poorly known. At a time when we face a worldwide biodiversity crisis, Forshaw and Gilbert have joined forces to compile the information on these birds in a most remarkable book.

Joseph M. Forshaw is a renowned Australian ornithologist. He is a research associate at the Australian Museum in Sydney and with the Australian National Wildlife Collection at the Commonwealth at Canberra. He was awarded a Queen Elizabeth II Silver Jubilee Medal for his achievements in ornithology and conservation. *Trogons: A Natural History of the Trogonidae* follows a series of many highly rated books, including *Parrots of the*

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World: An Identification Guide, the six-volume *Kingfishers and Related Birds*, *Turacos: A Natural History of the Musophagidae*, and *The Birds of Paradise and Bower Birds*. *Trogons* is similar in format to some of his other books on groups of birds. The preface presents a brief but informative explanation of the structure of the book and is followed by an introductory section, detailed species accounts arranged in taxonomic order, references, and two indexes (one for scientific names, the other for English names). The preface includes a figure that shows the external topology of trogons and quetzals in great detail, which is very useful for understanding many of the terms used on species descriptions. The combination of the preface and the introductory chapter make the remaining sections of the book accessible to any reader with an interest in birds (amateurs and specialists alike).

The introduction (17 pages) covers phylogenetic relationships among the trogons, physical features of trogons, distribution and habitats, movements, general habits, vocalizations, food and feeding, breeding, and status of conservation. All these topics are carefully presented and include the most recent available information. However, I must mention two weaknesses of this section. First, it contains some adaptationist explanations. For instance, "The purpose of this heterodactyl arrangement is uncertain, though it could be of assistance as the birds cling 'woodpecker-like' to the surface of a decayed tree trunk or branch while excavating nesting cavities" (page 22, on physical features). Such statements may be misleading in the absence of any direct evidence. Second, many of the examples given in this section are repeated in the species accounts, which seems an unnecessary redundancy. Fortunately, these flaws are relatively minor and do not detract much from the value of the book.

The core of the book is the species accounts (242 pages), presented in the classical format of many ornithological monographs, with African, Asian, and New World species described in separate sections. Characteristics of each subfamily, tribe, genus, and subgenus are described before the species in each group. Every dossier includes a range map and at least one color plate. Topics covered include the English and scientific names, distribution, description, subspecies, habitats and status, movements, habits, calls, feeding, breeding, and eggs. Most of those headings are listed for each species unless information is not available. All technical descriptions are based on museum specimens, and a reference to the number of specimens used is provided. Individual dossiers vary from 3 pages (Whitehead's Trogon) to 14 (Resplendent Quetzal; map and plates included). It is clear that Asian trogons are less well known than those in other regions, and the unevenness of the species accounts suggests that a major effort to gather data on poorly known species is urgently needed. But despite this, the book updates and summarizes the information on trogons and quetzals in a very accessible way, and there is no doubt that both amateurs and specialists will find these species accounts valuable.

The author acknowledges the inadequacy of describing bird calls by means of onomatopoeic representations of the sounds or vague terms such as "screech," "whistle," or "crackle." He also mentions that sonograms are not helpful for most readers. In this regard, it would have been useful to include a supplementary audio CD with examples of some of the most common calls. A feature like this would not have resulted in a significant increment in the book price. Unfortunately, the book comes to a sudden end after the species accounts, without a conclusion outlining specific research needs. An experienced ornithologist like Forshaw could have provided guidance for improving habitat management and conservation to ensure the survival of these majestic birds.

A major plus in the book is the stunning artwork that illustrates each species dossier. These plates are the contribution of Albert Earl Gilbert, one of the world's foremost bird artists, past president of the Society of Animal Artists, and winner of the U.S. Federal Duck Stamp competition. Although many bird features were taken from museum specimens, the artist made several expeditions to Africa, Southeast Asia, and tropical America to produce the illustrations, which portray each species in a characteristic posture in natural habitats.

Two other publications are available on this group of birds: *Handbook of the Birds of the World*, volume 6 (Collar 2001), and *Trogons and Quetzals of the World* (Johnsgard 2000). The main advantage of Forshaw's book over these is the level of detail in the species accounts. *Trogons: A Natural History of the Trogonidae* should therefore be included in the library of any museum or nature enthusiast.—Alejandro Espinosa de Los Monteros, *Departamento de Biología Evolutiva, Instituto de Ecología A.C. Km 2.5 carretera antigua a Coatepec, Xalapa, Veracruz 91070, Mexico. E-mail: alejandro.espinosa@inecol.edu.mx*

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