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Book Reviews

Authors: Ottens, Gert, Klaassen, Raymond, and Bijlsma, Rob G.

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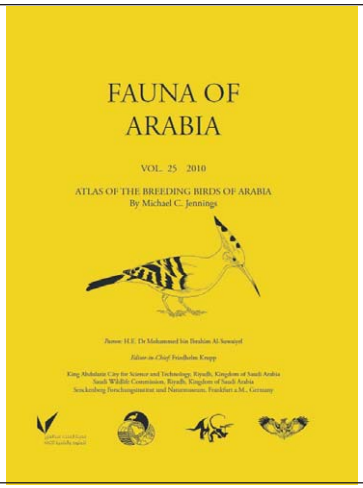
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Jennings M.C. 2010. Atlas of the breeding birds of Arabia, Fauna of Arabia Volume 25. Karger Libri AG, Basel, Switzerland. ISBN 9783-9299-078-34. 751 pp. Euro 120.



The Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia (ABBA) project is the brainchild of Michael Jennings and was commenced in 1984, in order to document the distribution of breeding birds of the Arabian Peninsula, including the Socotra Archi-pelago. In recent years several avifaunas of this region have been published, but only from countries on the Arabian Gulf. The vast Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Yemen hardly received any ornithological coverage for many decades. And although Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen published 'The Birds of Arabia' in 1954, that author (and consequently many of his publications) has now been found to be controversial. So, in a sense the current title is the first avifauna for the entire Peninsula.

The introductory chapter of the book explains how the ABBA project was set up and how data was collected. In Arabia it would not be possible to organize atlas projects that have been achieved in (for example) Western Europe. This is simply due to the vast area of the region involved, but also because observer coverage is very low. Therefore the data was collected from different sources. Almost 500 (mainly visiting) observers have contributed information to the ABBA database and virtually all the literature concerning Arabian ornithology was gleaned to collate distributional information. In addition, 40 field surveys were undertaken in all parts of the Arabian Peninsula, especially those regions that were poorly known in terms of their local bird communities.

Chapter 1 then deals with several interesting aspects of Arabian ornithology, including the phenomenon of a nomadic lifestyle in the arid parts of the Peninsula and finally exotic breeding birds of which 20 species have established them-selves as permanent fixtures of the avifauna. I found the final part of Chapter 2, dealing with the effects of (mostly an-thropogenic) habitat change on the breeding birds, very interesting. During the period of data collection (1984–2009) the Arabian environment has seen great changes and many of these had a dramatic effect on its breeding birds. Notably, many additional species have found breeding niches in 'new habitats' that have been created, such as manmade wetlands or extensive agricultural areas, habitats that hardly existed previously. This chapter closes with an overview of the zoogeographical affinities of Arabian breeding bird species.

In Chapter 3 ten ornithological regions are identified and the bird communities of each are described. These first three chapters contain many excellent pictures, including all of the endemics (and other regional 'specialties'), as well as illus-trative pictures of the habitats they inhabit.

This is followed by a chapter devoted to conservation. It deals with traditional human (over)exploitation as well as is-sues such as loss of habitat and the effects of introduced alien species. Specific conservation problems for the region, like oil pollution and the protection of the last remaining stands of mangrove, are dealt with in detail. In Chapter 5, we get to the heart of ABBA; 273 species accounts of birds that are known to breed (or have bred) in Arabia as well as a further 24 species for which there is strong evidence that they probably breed. Specially commissioned line drawings enliven each of the species accounts. For each breeding (or potentially breeding) species details of taxonomy, world distribution, the status and population in Arabia (usually by state), comments on habitats and ecology within Arabia and details of its breeding biology and phenology, are given. Full page breeding distribution maps are provided for all proven breeding species. And for some species several maps are used to explain important range extensions. Perhaps it would have been a good idea to include summaries of the species accounts in Arabic. This would have greatly enhanced the practical use of the book. The book does include a summary in Arabic, however.

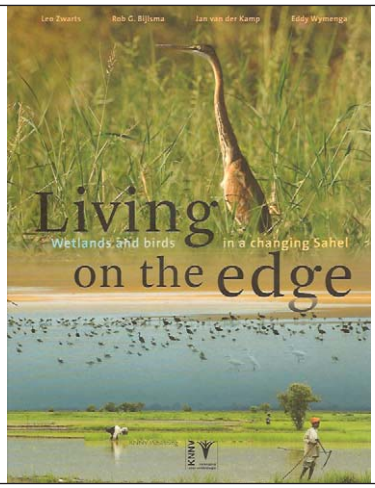
The value of this book transcends the Arabian Peninsula as it contains much information about the

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birds of the Middle East as a whole. But the only drawback I can mention is the price. A standard work like this should be available to those who need it: researchers, field workers and birders alike. But at the cost of the equivalent of Euro 120 this might prove to be too much of a hurdle for some Middle-Eastern nationals. This is a pity, because it is a very important and beautifully produced book that deserves a wide audience.

Gert Ottens, Ganzebloem 14, 3984 CG Odijk, The Netherlands (glanskraai@hotmail.com)

Zwarts L., Bijlsma R.G., van der Kamp J., Wymenga E. 2009. Living on the edge: Wetlands and birds in a changing Sahel. KNNV Publishing, Zeist, The Netherlands. ISBN 978-90-5011-280-2. Hardback, 564 pp. Lavishly illustrated by photographs, graphs, tables, paintings and drawings. Euro 64.95



The Sahel (Africa) is the narrow zone between the dry Sahara desert in the north and woodlands and tropical rain forests in the south. It is a major wintering area for Palearctic migrants, not the least because five large wetlands are located within this region. Generally, the area is relatively dry, and thus precipitation rather than temperature is dictating the growing season. The single annual rainy season occurs during the northern summer (July–August), when rain revives the savannah and feeds the wetlands. Peculiar to the Sahel ecosystem is that the amount of rainfall varies considerably between years, resulting in dry and wet years. In the seventies and eighties a long period of droughts occurred, which is now known as the Great Drought. During this period, it was noticed in Europe that species that winter in the Sahel (for example Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* and Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) strongly declined. Obviously, Sahelian conditions have an important impact on European bird populations.

Four Dutch ornithologists got intrigued by this ecosystem, and decided that a review about the conditions in the Sahel and the effect on wintering European birds was needed. Expeditions were organized (in the early years often paid by the participants themselves), international literature was scrutinized (including the inaccessible Russian literature), and loads of data were extracted from forgotten notebooks and regional offices. The end product of this massive endeavour is the book entitled '*Living on the Edge: Wetlands and birds in a changing Sahel*'.

'*Living on the Edge*' consists of four main parts. The first three chapters form an introduction to the Sahel (and to some extent the rest of Africa), focusing on rainfall, river systems, vegetation and land use. The second part of the book describes five important wetland areas situated in the Sahel zone, and there is a separate chapter on Rice Fields. The well-studied Inner Niger Delta and Senegal Delta receive most attention, clearly much less material could be collected about Lake Chad or the Sudd. Chapter 13, on the diversity and distribution of wintering Eurasian bird species and chapter 14, on locusts and grasshoppers, are two enjoyable stories somewhat hidden between the descriptions of wetlands and the species accounts. The third part of the book consists of chapters on 27 different migrant species wintering in the Sahel. For every species, details on the breeding range, distribution in Africa and the population change in relation to rainfall or flood extent are provided. A valuable bonus are the maps with ring recoveries. Sitting on a pile of satellite tracking data of Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* and Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, I would had wished for more extensive chapters on these species. However, the chapter on the Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* is very detailed and extensive, which satisfies the raptor enthusiast. The last part of the book consists of a chapter on the desert crossing, a chapter on carry-over effects of Sahel droughts on reproduction, and a chapter on the relationship between the Sahel and bird numbers. Especially the last two summarizing chapters clearly sketch how important the conditions in the Sahel are for the survival and reproduction of birds wintering in this region. The conclusion is far from positive: birds depending on the Sahel are in deep trouble. Conditions have deteriorated, and things are expected to become worse due to climate change, deforestation, agricultur-

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al intensification, increasing grazing pressure, the further loss of wetlands, and on-going bird hunting. Evidently, the Sahel needs our urgent attention and possibilities should be sought to turn the dark prospect for Sahelian migrants.

Although the book mainly focuses on species that spend the northern winter in the Sahel, the region seems also crucial for species that visit it for shorter times. For example, our own recent studies indicate that Red-backed Shrikes *Lanius collurio* and Common Cuckoos *Cuculus canorus* make long migratory stopovers in the Sahel in autumn, before continuing further south in late autumn/early winter. Stopping in the Sahel in autumn might be commonplace for migrants wintering generally more to the south (this seems to be the common behaviour in East Africa), and thus the importance of the Sahel stretches beyond wintering birds. In a next edition, these transit migrants might deserve a separate chapter.

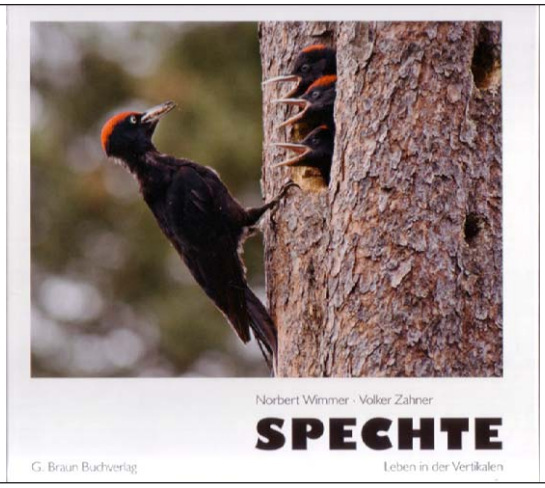
Every single chapter of the book is packed with enormous amounts of information. Still, the text is very pleasant to read, not only simply because it is well-written, but also because many anecdotes, technical details and comments are provided in separate boxes or at the end of each chapter in the form of notes. Furthermore, the authors make extensive use of very well drafted figures (274 in total!). At the same time, it is a true pleasure to look at the plentiful pictures and smart drawings. Seeing the birds in their natural landscapes in combination with the vivid text makes the reader imagining himself in Africa.

'*Living on the edge*' certainly is a milestone publication that belongs on the bookshelf (or better: working desk!) of any person that has an interest in bird migration. Little we know about the whereabouts and ecology of 'our' breeding birds while they are not in Europe. For this reason, '*Living on the edge*' truly is a giant leap forward, shedding light on the secret life of migrants in Africa (or at least in the Sahel). Also, I believe that the book will be a huge inspiration for bird researchers to think more about the non-breeding season and Africa, and for conservationists to tackle the problems migrants face in Africa.

It is more than appropriate that the leading author, Leo Zwarts, was honoured with two important prizes for this book, the Herman Klomp Award in 2009 and the Luc Hoffmann Medal in 2011. Furthermore, '*Living on the edge*' was voted as the Best Bird Book of the Year 2010 by British Birds and the BTO.

Raymond Klaassen, Lund University, Sweden (Raymond.Klaassen@biol.lu.se)

Wimmer N. & Zahner V. 2010. Spechte. Ein Leben in der Vertikalen. G. Braun Buchverlag, Leinfelden-Echterdingen. ISBN 978-3-7650-8526-0. Hardcover, 112 pp., 179 colour plates, 10 maps, 1 table. Euro 27.90



A delightful book, this European woodpecker breviarum. Usually, books filled with stunning photographs are just that, but here the text is well informed and referenced. Although the eye is constantly distracted from the text, it pays to read this book. It is about much more than woodpeckers, for example about forests, the trees in the forest, bark, phloem-sap, dead wood, insect life in trees, ants, anvils, nest-building, carbon dioxide in cavities, fieldwork, protection, secondary nest-users, and so on. In short, the kind of information absolutely necessary to understand what makes woodpeckers tick. The photographs are a delight. Close-ups are presented when called for, but panoramic views are not lacking either. This is what you see in real life: a tall trunk, a tiny woodpecker, an even smaller nest entrance. A photograph I would have liked to see is of the typical posture of an immobile female Black Woodpecker peeking out of the nest entrance, a few days prior to egg laying, with bill held straight but eyes turned downwards and latched onto the observer who feels very much observed himself. But that is more than outweighed by stunning plates of excavating woodpeckers and Crested Tits, trafficing Hornets, a head-on flying Goshawk (a woodpecker killer par excellence), woodpeckers in flight, and what not. A photogenic group of birds, in a wonderful habitat. This book is a nice tribute to both.

Rob G. Bijlsma, Doldersummerweg 1, 7983 LD Wapse, The Netherlands (rob.bijlsma@planet.nl)

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