

Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

EDITED BY R. TODD ENGSTROM

The following critiques express the opinions of the individual evaluators regarding the strengths, weaknesses, and value of the books they review. As such, the appraisals are subjective assessments and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors or any official policy of the American Ornithologists' Union.

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Handbook of the Birds of the World, vol. 14: Bush-shrikes to Old World Sparrows.—Josep del Hoyo, Andrew Elliott, and David Christie, Eds. 2009. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain. 893 pp., 51 color plates, 655 color photos, 484 distribution maps. ISBN 9788496553507. Cloth binding. \$267.00.—With the publication of volume 14, this monumental 16-volume project to describe and illustrate the world's species of birds, begun in 1992, is now nearing completion. Only the vireos and Old and New World “9-primaried” oscines remain. The present volume covers 17 families, in the following order: Malaconotidae (bush-shrikes), Prionopidae (helmet-shrikes), Vangidae (vangas), Dicruridae (drongos), Callaeidae (New Zealand wattlebirds), Notiomystidae (stitchbirds), Grallinidae (mudlarks), Struthideidae (Australian mudnesters), Artamidae (woodswallows), Cracticidae (butcher-birds), Pityriaseidae (bristleheads), Ptilonorhynchidae (bower-birds), Paradisaeidae (birds-of-paradise), Corvidae (crows and jays), Buphagidae (oxpeckers), Sturnidae (starlings), and Passeridae (Old World sparrows). The first two families are African, the vangas are endemic to Madagascar, the drongos are widespread in the Old World tropics, and three of the last four are found throughout Afro-Eurasia. Inserted between them are eight families which, with the exception of the Bornean Bristlehead, are centered in or endemic to Australasia.

Today the mix of these families in one volume may seem strange phylogenetically, but it follows the Wetmore-Peters sequence that prevailed with little change throughout most of the 20th century. The entire handbook project is planned on that sequence (Bock 1994), which, given its growing disparity with avian phylogeny revealed by the 25-year-old molecular revolution, raises the question: why has the project not followed the molecular lead? It is a question which no doubt troubled the project's editorial council in the early years—but by now I hope its members are breathing more easily. DNA–DNA hybridization and DNA sequence studies have produced one phylogenetic revelation after another through the past two decades, creating enormous flux as further questions were generated and contradictions reassessed. The smoke may now have started to clear, but matters are still far from settled. Global check-lists concerned with only a name and a thumbnail account of distribution and published with a lead

time of only a few years may be able to cope with such a fever of change, but not a global handbook on the scale of the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* (HBW): its present edition is still unfinished after two decades. In hindsight, then, its decision to keep to an old, established, and familiar sequence such as the Wetmore-Peters has been most wise.

Not so easily accepted are cases in which the HBW's editors keep genera in the families to which they were assigned in the Wetmore-Peters arrangement when molecular research has shown them to belong to other families altogether. In most such cases in the present volume—e.g., *Lanioturdus* in Malaconotidae, *Chaetorhynchus* in Dicruridae, *Grallina* in Grallinidae, *Notiomystis* in Notiomystidae, and *Pityriasis* in Pityriaseidae—the solution makes sense and the outcome is satisfactory. But not so in one instance: the inclusion of the cnemophilid satinbirds (Cnemophilidae) in the birds-of-paradise, Paradisaeidae. Not only molecular but also morphological and behavioral traits show that the satinbirds are unrelated to the birds-of-paradise; yet, though this has been known for a decade and is recorded in the introduction to the Paradisaeidae, the satinbirds are kept there as a subfamily. Their three species are even given the English group name of “bird-of-paradise,” to the confusion of the birders who will use this work. More than that, hiding the satinbirds away among the birds-of-paradise limits general perceptions of their distinctiveness and relationships, which, in a work of this stature, has ramifications for other areas of ornithology. In zoogeography, for example, it diminishes understanding of the importance of montane New Guinea, the home of the satinbirds, as not just a co-inheritor of ancestral stocks of songbirds but also a primary refuge for them after Australia became desiccated in Plio-Pleistocene times. Since the Sibley-Ahlquist work on avian phylogeny in the late 20th century (Sibley and Ahlquist 1990 and references therein), diverse new corvidan families have been uncovered in montane New Guinea, the satinbirds among them.

It is customary to introduce each volume in the HBW series with a scholarly essay on an ornithological topic of significance. In volume 14 the topic is the deserving one of birding, written by Stephen Moss, British natural-history producer with the BBC and prominent birding author. If titles describe content, this one,

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"Birding past, present and future—a global view," succeeds generally. The 28-page essay, plus references, traces the beginnings and development of birdwatching to its explosion in the late 20th century, driven by the communications revolution—on the ground, in the air, and in cyberspace—as well as by better optics and a plethora of field guides. It delves into the growth of birding in the developing as well as developed world, analyzes the socioeconomics of the birding society, and goes on to describe how modern birding has contributed to wildlife conservation and science, particularly through faunal surveys by the citizen-scientist movement. New technology is at the forefront here, with imaging replacing written records of rare or regionally "new" species. The economic value of birding is also covered from the aspect of travel and tourism, particularly its links to conservation in developing countries. Moss concludes with a reasonably in-depth assessment of the future of birding and its value, addressing its potential impact on rare and declining species, both good and bad, as well as the effects of political instability, the possible impact of molecular barcoding, and, finally, the spiritual well-being that simple birdwatching and other outdoor activity bring to humankind.

Some of this is rather fanciful. Moss's observations about DNA barcoding replacing field identification in the near future reveal a naive understanding of population genetics; and he quotes outdated Sibley and Ahlquist (1990) data when drawing attention to the disturbance created by radical change to taxonomic status and sequence—though that disturbance is real. Yet this is quibbling. The only serious shortcoming in his essay, given its title, is its focus on birding in the United States and Britain among developed countries, and in former British colonies and Turkey in the developing world, to the exclusion of almost all else. Moss excuses this by reasoning that it was in those countries that nearly all the activity has happened, a perception based substantially on information published in the English language and which takes little account of other early movements in northern Europe, particularly Germany, and their later development in South America. Otherwise, his essay stands as a particularly comprehensive review of birding today, all aspects thoroughly thought through, carefully planned, coherently synthesized, and well balanced, and all written in a straightforward, easy-to-read style.

The remainder of the volume is its core: the accounts of each family and its component species, the latter figured on superior field-guide-style plates on which the more distinctive subspecies are included. Authenticity is virtually guaranteed by the pedigree of the authors selected for each family: ornithologists of eminence in the region where each family is centered, most with extensive field experience of their subjects (e.g., C. H. Fry for bush-shrikes; I. C. R. Rowley and E. M. Russell for Australian mudnesters, woodswallows, and butcherbirds; and C. B. and D. W. Frith for bowerbirds and birds-of-paradise). Introducing each family is a map of its global distribution and a particularly long and detailed essay covering its systematics and life-history characteristics: morphology, habitats, general habits, voice, food and feeding, breeding, movements, relationship with man, and—last but not least—status and conservation.

The family essays follow the format established in previous volumes, and, more descriptive than analytic, keep to the same high standards of factual information. Although rather short and no more than 4 to 13 pages for the families with only one or two

species, they are much longer for the larger families: 30 to 40 pages for the bush-shrikes, bowerbirds, and sparrows; and 55 to 70 for the even larger birds-of-paradise, starlings, and crows and jays. Only in the bowerbirds would I have preferred a leavening of the extended descriptions of behavior at the bower with some theorizing about the reasons for such behavior; and the individual, cherry-picked display sequences described for some birds-of-paradise could have done with further editing and been contrasted more comparatively within and between genera. Previous reviewers have commonly criticized a lack of specificity in bibliographic referencing here and elsewhere through the species texts. A bibliography of author and date is given at the end of each family and species treatment, which refers to a main bibliography of full references in the back of each volume. It is the absence of a direct connection between an observation in the actual texts and its reference in the bibliographies that gives the most cause for complaint. Yet for me it is not so serious a problem because the references at the end of family and species accounts always quote the authors, and, because most of us know their areas of specialization, finding the appropriate reference in the main bibliography is rarely difficult. As it is, the editors have not changed their policy and format, and probably will not in the future for reasons of consistency, space, and readability. This makes ongoing caviling rather pointless.

A highlight of HBW family accounts—rightly praised by previous reviewers—is the multitude of photographs, usually one and sometimes several per page, illustrating one or another family trait. And the present volume does not let us down. All in all, 28 of the 48 species of bush-shrikes are shown, 5 of 8 helmet-shrikes, 21 of 26 drongos, 34 of 39 species of birds-of-paradise plus the 3 cnemophilids, 85 of 123 crows and jays, 64 of 112 starlings, 31 of 37 sparrows, and all but one of the species of vangas, woodswallows, butcherbirds, and bowerbirds; and those families with just one or two species have all shown. Such a comprehensive coverage, which includes representatives of almost all genera, complements the hand-figured species plates by adding subtleties of "jizz" so difficult to capture in a painting. Emphasis throughout has been placed on depicting characteristic actions of life history, in feeding, nesting, displaying, and defense or attack, often in amazing situations. The range is both staggering and stunning, but some still manage to stand out: an adult Black-backed Puffback (*Malaconotidae*) sheltering young in the nest (p. 80), a Blue Vanga (*Vangidae*) foraging upside-down (p. 154), a silhouette of a Greater Racquet-tailed Drongo (*Dicruridae*) captured in flight (p. 175), the extraordinarily decorated bower of a Vogelkop Bowerbird (*Ptilonorhynchidae*) and its maker (p. 367), the displays of Victoria's Riflebird, Wilson's Bird-of-Paradise, Carola's Parotia, and lekking Greater Birds-of-Paradise (*Paradisaeidae*, pp. 429, 441, 443, 447), swirling flocks of Common Starlings (*Sturnidae*) in the sky (p. 670), Desert Sparrows (*Passeridae*) fighting to exhaustion (p. 768), and a White-winged Snowfinch (*Passeridae*) feeding a fledgling against a diorama-like alpine background (p. 787). Adding to the value of all the photographs, furthermore, are lengthy explanatory captions that summarize relevant aspects of life history in good detail.

Because the family essays in the HBW project are so detailed and cover the traits shared by component species so well, the species accounts themselves can be abbreviated to little more than thumbnail summaries. It is an approach quite the opposite of

that taken in major multivolume regional handbooks, such as the *Handbook of the Birds of the Western Palearctic* and *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds*. Yet in a project on the scale of the HBW, it is clearly a far more efficient one and has probably cut the weight of print that might otherwise have been spent by at least 70–80%. For this, the Editorial Council for HBW and Lynx Edicions are to be congratulated on their planning. Their design must have had a big effect on shortening project time and on maintaining financial viability. And it has been put into effect without losing serious handbook-type information.

As in earlier volumes, the species accounts in volume 14 begin with names (English, Latin, French, German, and Spanish plus alternative English names) and then deal briefly with taxonomy, including subspecies, and go on to summarize distribution, morphology of sex and age classes, habitat, food and feeding, breeding, movements, and status and conservation, in much the same sequence as in the family essays. Despite their brevity, the accounts are condensed to pack in as much information as possible. Distribution maps are given against each species, and though these are small, they are sufficiently finely printed to provide a clear grasp of distribution, enhanced by presenting the ranges of permanent residents and the seasonal breeding and nonbreeding ranges of migrants and nomads in three different colors. As life-history sections in the accounts are routinely descriptive, interest focuses more on taxonomic treatment and the plates. Taxonomy is taken, as a rule, from current regional and global check-lists; but underlying it throughout the HBW project is a species circumscription based on the biological species concept, delimiting polytypic species with regional subspecies. Not only is this consistent with prevailing taxonomies globally (e.g., Peters et al. 1931–1986, Dickinson 2003), it is also theoretically consistent within itself, providing a scientific classification that is testable with the same set of criteria across taxa. At a time when some regional check-lists are toying with species taxa based on diverse concepts according to the nature of available data—thus producing unscientific classifications that cannot be tested with the same criteria across taxa—this conservatism is a relief.

There are no real taxonomic surprises in volume 14. Its conservatism, in fact, has held on to the old unbalanced species taxonomies of the Australian gray butcherbird (*Cracticidae*) and black-eared catbird (*Ptilonorhynchidae*) groups, despite recent evidence to the contrary. Moreover, if the newly re-found *Parotia berlepschi* is to be split from *P. carolae* (*Paradisaeidae*), as here, so also should *P. helenae* and *P. lawesii*; they abut without known introgression. Anything but conservative, however, is the generic treatment of the Australian Magpie, the most familiar of all Australia's birds, placed traditionally in the monotypic genus *Gymnorhina*. Unlike Christidis and Boles (2008), the authors of its family in HBW volume 14 use, for the first time, serious molecular evidence to lump *Gymnorhina* in *Cracticus* (butcherbirds). Yet lumping it in with *Cracticus* is only one of several taxonomic solutions offered by the molecular phylogeny. Given that the Australian Magpie occupies a different adaptive zone from that of the butcherbirds, with attendant divergent behaviors and morphologies—stratified communalism, complex vocabulary with year-round chorusing, ground-foraging without lardering, and a more currawong-like temporal region of the skull, to name a few—its lumping seems somewhat premature.

The plates of all species are a standout of the HBW project—where else can one find the figures of all species of all families of the world's birds within the covers of one work? The figures on the plates are arranged in field-guide-like layout, yet the artists gathered to paint them are more than good draftsmen and usually manage to catch life and expression as well. The vantas, birds-of-paradise, and sparrows are refreshingly well done; and only the starlings and Stitchbird (*Notiomystidae*) are somewhat flat. A feature of a field-guide-type format that presents every species in a family is its ability to tempt readers to think for themselves about taxonomic status and relationships among the species. This is helped by illustrations of both sexes when they are sexually dimorphic, and of distinctive subspecies as well, taxa that have been or could be treated as species. This strength can also be a weakness should the figures confound differences and similarities and mislead. Here I draw attention to three examples of cases that I hope can be avoided in the last volumes of this work. The figures of the two species of the New Zealand Saddleback (*Callaeidae*) will have readers scratching their heads as to why these allopatric taxa are even treated as subspecies, let alone species. Had the juvenile plumages of both taxa been figured as well, the reasoning would have been much clearer. In the case of Lawes's Parotia (*Paradisaeidae*), the two forms as figured differ only in the tone of the supranarial feathering, which makes one wonder how they could ever be separated as species. The structure of that feathering in the form *helenae*, however, is rather different: the bronzed supranarial feathering is much less extensive and terminates in a short, erect tuft. The overall figures of the heads of these taxa may be rather small, but they are still large enough to show these differences clearly. In the last case, the Black-eared and Green Catbird group (*Ptilonorhynchidae*), of which all major forms are figured, there has been dispute about which, if any, of the forms should be treated as species. To help an uninitiated reader reach an objective judgement, those forms should have been laid out in geographic sequence. But they are not; the layout actually does quite the opposite, placing the extreme northern and southern forms—those that are most different from one another—together, while positioning those in between—the intermediate forms—farther away on the same page.

A final note on nomenclature: the HBW project has consistently respected the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature and followed prevailing usage in the spelling of scientific names. That is, until the last volumes, in which there seems to have been a lapse or two. In the present volume, in particular, the long-used name *Dendrocitta bayleyi* for the Andaman Treepie has been changed to *bayleii*. Such changes unsettle nomenclature and are at variance with the principle of prevailing usage. I raise this because in the introduction to volume 14 there is an editorial comment about prevailing usage: "This highlights one of [the] dangers of the concept of prevailing usage under the current Code: prevailing usage can change; an original spelling cannot." This is arguable. In practice, "original" spellings of species-group names change continuously with the gender of their genus and according to corrections required by no fewer than 25 clauses of the Code. The specific name for the Andaman Treepie, described in 1863, is a case in point. The original spelling of its name was *bazlei*, but that was immediately emended to both *bayleyi* and *bayleii*. *Dendrocitta bayleyi* caught on—the treepie was named

after E. C. Bayley—and *D. bayleii* did not; but the latter has only recently, in 2009, been found to be subject to one of the 25 clauses just mentioned. Yet there are other clauses in the Code that clearly protect and validate the conventional spelling *bayleyi*, and users today may well wonder why they were not followed. Because the HBW project has such an overarching influence on global ornithology, I would urge the editors to consult more widely when confronted, in the last two volumes, with any changes to long-accustomed spellings of names.

In conclusion, it has been a privilege for me to review a volume of this great work. Covering the world of birds at such breadth and depth and at such high standards of scholarship and production is an astounding achievement. It makes my few (and hopefully constructive) criticisms quite puny. The quality of paper and printing alone is unmatched in ornithological literature. This is a major landmark in the history of ornithology, ranking alongside the *Catalogue of the Birds in the British Museum*. And it is the first, in the modern era, to figure all species of birds presently recognized. To manage such diverse teams of writers, artists, and section editors to bring each volume to fruition, one after the other at regular yearly intervals, has been an achievement in itself for both the Editorial Council and the publishers. It is a testament to management skills of the first order.—RICHARD SCHODDE, *Australian Biological Resources Study*, GPO Box 787, Canberra City, ACT 2601, Australia. E-mail: rschodde@grapevine.com.au

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