

The Birds of Scotland

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The Birds of Scotland.—edited by Ron Forrester, Ian Andrews, Chris McInerny, Ray Murray, Bob McGowan, Bernard Zonfrillo, Mike Betts, David Jardine, and David Grundy. 2007. Scottish Ornithologists' Club, Aberlady, Scotland. xvii + 1632 pp., 900 photographs, 1500 tables, charts, and maps, seven appendices. ISBN 978-0-9512139-0-2 (two-volume set). £75 (~\$150; hardcover).

It is not often that a reviewer has the opportunity to legitimately use the term “monumental.” Nevertheless, this is the adjective that best describes this two-volume set. Dealing with more than 500 species, with over 1600 pages, 1500 tables and charts, 900 photographs, and an incredible amount of information, *Birds of Scotland* must surely be among the best-written and produced and most detailed national avifaunas ever to be published. As an ornithological publishing achievement, it has rarely been equaled.

Extending over approximately 30 000 square miles (less than half the size of New England), Scotland is one of Europe's smaller countries, yet it has a bird list of over 500 species—a qualification held by only four other European nations. This species diversity is attributable to a number of factors, including its highly indented coastline with a multitude of islands (on which breed 45% of Europe's seabirds), a high habitat diversity (including arctic-alpine tundra and native conifer and deciduous forests), and large expanses of bog, estuaries, and freshwater and marine lochs. Thus, Scotland is a favorite country for birders interested in seeing the huge waterfowl, shorebird and seabird populations—over 30 seabird colonies contain more than 10 000 pairs of birds. Moreover, its geographical position ensures that it annually receives vagrants from the New World (86 species recorded), Europe (>100 species), and the eastern Palearctic (66 species). Of the 509 species recorded, a remarkable 50% are birds recorded on twenty or fewer occasions, making Scotland a hunting

ground for the rarity chasers who flock each year to world-famous migration sites like Fair Isle in the Shetland Islands.

Such a high diversity should make the writing of a national avifauna a daunting task. Nevertheless, this is the third such book. In 1953, Baxter and Rintoul published *The Birds of Scotland*, at that time, the last word in the status and distribution of species. In the 1960s and 1970s, a large increase in the amount of information available led Valerie Thom to publish her tremendous *Birds in Scotland* in 1986, updating the previous work. The rapid increase in birding and research activity that prompted Thom's book accelerated and continued through the 1980s until the present and has resulted in the need for yet another version of Scotland's avifauna. This is the challenge that Forrester et al. so ably engage.

This A4-format, two-volume set, which is housed in a robust green slipcase, comprises 12 introductory sections vital to understanding the distribution, diversity, and status of Scotland's bird life. They include sections on Scotland's avian diversity, bird conservation, geography and habitats, the fossil record of Scotland's birds, weather patterns and bird migration, changes in Scotland's bird populations, the history of Scottish bird studies, the history of Scottish bird photography, and pioneers of Scotland's rich ornithological heritage.

The introductory sections are followed by the "meat" of the book—the individual species accounts. Each of the country's 509 species has a separate account illustrated with maps and figures and photographs. Each species account contains a wealth of detailed information about the occurrence of the species, its habitat, estimated population size, population trends, threats, and knowledge gaps. For some of the better-known or more frequently recorded species such as the Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima*), the accounts may extend over six pages, while for extreme vagrants, they may cover only a page or two.

The amount of detail compressed into these accounts is very impressive. For example, for the Common Eider there are maps showing the colonization of the country beginning in the pre-1800s, the current breeding distribution, the distribution of molting flocks, and the winter distribution of the species. Also provided is a table detailing breeding populations in nine Scottish regions. The text includes information on the breeding ecology of the species in Scotland, population trends, and current threats. For vagrants, the information is more limited, but still substantial. For Black Stork (*Ciconia nigra*), for example, recorded a total of 15 times, the text provides detail on every accepted record.

All of the species accounts are illustrated by exceptional photographs. The authors are to be commended for resisting the temptation to take the easy way and use photographs taken outside of the country—all are from birds photographed in Scotland. This alone comprises a highly valuable historic archive. Where "live" photographs do not exist, or the species is now extinct, a few are of study skins or mounts of the type specimens for the country. Many of the species accounts are also illustrated with beautiful and evocative vignettes specially drawn for this book by talented Scottish artists including Tommy Daniels, Keith Brockie, John Busby, and Chris Rose. The two frontispieces of a seabird colony by Keith Brockie and Chris Rose's painting of Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) habitat in the high Grampian Mountains are outstanding.

This two-volume set is, and will remain for the foreseeable future, the definitive account of Scotland's avifauna. It will be a vital resource for researchers interested in the changing patterns of bird distribution and status, for those who are contemplating a visit to this wonderful country, and for those who simply value

having high-quality ornithological literature on their shelves. Unfortunately, the currently weak dollar does not make it inexpensive (£75 or approximately \$150); however, it is an exceptional value.—HECTOR GALBRAITH, Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences, 837 Camp Arden Rd., Dummerston, VT 05301. E-mail: hg2@hughes.net.