

The Birds of Malawi.

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The Birds of Malawi.—Francoise Dowsett-Lemaire and Robert J. Dowsett. 2006. Turaco Press & Aves a.s.b.l., Rue Fush 3, B-4000 Liege, Belgium (www.aves.be). 556 pp., 44 color images, 8 black-and-white images, 13 line drawings and maps, and 620 distribution maps for 650 species. ISBN 2-87225-004-2. Softcover, \$35.—If you keep tropical fish, you might have in your collection of small, brightly colored gems a specimen or two from Lake Nyasa. This lake, which carries the name of its colonial past (Nyasaland), has yielded tropical fish for export to collectors and museums for decades. The beauty of Lake Nyasa, the deepest of all lakes in Africa, and its pristine piscine inhabitants parallel the attractive avifauna in Malawi.

The Birds of Malawi brings together all significant knowledge of the ecology, distribution, taxonomy, breeding, and migration of the 650 species known to occur in Malawi in a well-organized format with an easy-to-read and clearly written text, supported by an extensive bibliography of more than 700 references. The book is the first comprehensive work on the birds of Malawi since Benson and Benson (1977). The authors are premier naturalists with long and extensive experience in Malawi and in African ornithology elsewhere on the continent, primarily in southern Africa. With this important publication, they share their firsthand knowledge and, likely, documentation of all that has been published on the avifauna of Malawi.

Ornithological study in Africa—the world's second largest continent, with 56 nations and vast physiographic and cultural diversity—is still in its infancy because of the dearth of seasoned observers and an irregular history of bird study. Many ornithological conundrums in the region remain unsolved. Much of Africa's landscape is changing rapidly as a result of deforestation, population expansion, and environmental degradation. The chapters on vegetation and major bird habitats and conservation issues speak well to those issues and articulate the urgent need for protection and preservation. A fascinating chapter on the history of ornithology in Malawi documents its links to the nation's colonial past; ornithologists from Great Britain, professional and amateur alike, have played a significant role in documenting Malawi's avian ecology.

Although it contains numerous color photographs of some of Malawi's sublimely beautiful birds, *The Birds of Malawi* is not a field guide to identification, but excellent field guides are available. The range maps that are provided for nearly every species succinctly summarize the most recent knowledge of distribution and movements of most of the breeding birds of the country, and migration charts of the 100 or so avian visitors are likewise clear and concise. These data have resulted from the work of a detailed national atlas project, to which many dedicated field workers contributed.

Included for those who visit Malawi for its birds, as well as for those who live there, is a comprehensive description of important bird areas and their locations, including national parks, forest reserves, and other protected areas. Many of these areas are under great pressure from human activities. We should do everything possible to encourage and support Malawian ornithologists in their efforts to protect and conserve the avifauna of their country.

This is a scientific work of high quality, written with a sense of precision and produced on durable and high-quality paper. If it is to be a companion in the field, however, the paper cover should be reinforced. The front cover displays a high-resolution photograph of a Boehm's Bee-eater (*Merops boehmi*) securing a dragonfly in its mandibles, and I am sure that you will want to protect this gorgeous image.

It is my pleasure to unequivocally recommend this title as essential for anyone interested in the vast and colorful panorama of birdlife in Africa. I spent nearly three personally delightful years in the 1980s studying natural history in Malawi and can attest not only to the fascination of its birdlife but also to the gentle personality of the country and the character of its people. Malawi is described as The Warm Heart of Africa by tourist organizations, both local and international. *The Birds of Malawi* belongs in the hands and on the shelves of all who love and study African birds. It should be a standard reference text in all respectable ornithological libraries, personal and academic.—LARRY SCHWAB, *West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia 26505, USA. E-mail: larryschwab@verizon.net*

LITERATURE CITED

- BENSON, C. W., AND F. M. BENSON. 1977. *The Birds of Malawi*. Montfort Press, Limbe, Malawi.