

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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Essential Ornithology.—Graham Scott. 2010. Oxford University Press, New York, New York. ix + 162 pp., 30 color and 75 black-and-white illustrations. ISBN: 978-0198569978 (pbk). Hardcover, \$110.00; softcover, \$55.00.—Dr. Scott, a comparative avian physiologist, appears to have targeted the interested layperson, student, or scientist, who may have considerable experience observing birds, but who has little academic training in the field. His goal was to give students of ornithology a “way in” to the field of academic ornithology, without competing with longer treatises. In my view, this well-written, short book is very successful in meeting that goal.

The book's seven chapters cover evolution, feathers and flight, migration and navigation, reproduction (including courtship and song), foraging and predator avoidance, and populations/communities/conservation. The author writes in a lively, accessible style, and the well-chosen case studies (effectively illustrated) provide many highlights of the book. There is no bibliography, but “key references” listed in the margin direct the reader to selected studies. I noticed a few typographic errors. A feature that students may find particularly useful is “flight path” boxes in the margins. These provide conceptual links to related topics in other chapters: in the section on physiology and migration in Chapter 3, the flight path points out that birds strategically manage their mass to maximize flying efficiency (Chapter 2). The presentation of concepts in the margins is also helpful (although perhaps some space could have been saved by changing the shape of the various boxes). The overall effect is of a professor adding parenthetical comments to help the students integrate course material and drive home key messages.

Many of the examples given are classic ones such as the European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) migratory response to displacement, the mafia-like behavior of parasitic Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*), DDT-induced eggshell weakening in Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinum*), and extrapair copulation and sperm competition in birds. Although some are as recent as 2009, others are frequently cited studies from the past several decades. I found myself (an ecologically-oriented ornithologist who has taught ornithology for a number of years) learning new details on topics

such as song development, physiology and migration, and relative hippocampal size in *Paridae* species varying in caching tendencies. The brevity of the book does not allow presentation of opposing viewpoints in most cases. However, I can imagine college (or even high school) students becoming interested in ornithology as a result of reading this book.

Essential Ornithology has created its own niche, quite distinct from the well-known *Ornithology* (Gill 2007). In my opinion, the latter remains the standard for advanced undergraduate/graduate level ornithology courses, given its more thorough coverage of the field and extensive bibliography. However, *Essential Ornithology* reaches a different audience, and I recommend it for community, nature center, and academic libraries, and birders wanting to find out more of how birds live.—TIMOTHY BRUSH, *Department of Biology, University of Texas-Pan American, 1201 West University Drive, Edinburg, Texas 78539, USA. E-mail: tbrush@utpa.edu.*

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Birds in Books: Three Hundred Years of South Asian Ornithology—A Bibliography.—Aasheesh Pittie. 2010. Permanent Black, Ranikhet, India. xxi + 845 pp. ISBN 81-7824-294-X. Rs 795. Distributed by Orient Blackswan Private Ltd. (www.orientblackswan.com).—This volume is an outstanding work of meticulous research documenting for the first time the ornithology of South Asia and nearby political areas: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Tibet. The region encompasses both Oriental and Palaearctic realms.

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