

The Birds of Borneo

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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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The Birds of Borneo, 4th ed.—Bertram E. Smythies, revised by Geoffrey W. H. Davison. 1999. Natural History Publications (Borneo), Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia. xii + 853 pp., 57 color plates. ISBN 983-812-028-6. Cloth, \$89.00.—What deskbound ornithologist can resist at least an abstract fascination with the birdlife of faraway Borneo? The very name sends a tingle of excitement and anxiety. Of course, the Borneo of the misty and nostalgic past is long gone. It is no longer an impenetrable island wilderness. Politically it is partitioned into three nations and seven distinct political units—Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak), the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam, and Indonesia (West, Central, South, and East Kalimantan).

It is here that the art of industrial-scale “selective” logging was perfected, and most of the island’s forests have been thinned for their magnificent dipterocarp timber. Many of us have read of the battles fought by indigenous groups (notably the Penan) to protect their traditional forest lands from the giant logging interests. The government leadership in both Malaysia and Indonesia, needless to say, came down on the side of the loggers, much to the dismay of the tribes as well as environmentalists around the world. The great El Niño fires of 1982–1983 and 1997–1998 made a bad situation worse by further degrading cut-over forests, by burning forest edges, and by providing “environmental cover” for wanton burning by those who wished to clear forest areas for monoculture plantations.

Things are a long way from what they were when Smythies penned his first edition, but even today there are many protected areas in Borneo, totalling some 6.3 million hectares, much of which comprises old growth forest. So there are still places to go in search of intact forest avifaunas. And this book is an excellent introduction to the birds and their habitats.

B. E. Smythies, who died in England in 1999, was a professional forester as well as a superb amateur field ornithologist and botanist in the British colonial tradition. He produced two classics of Old World or-

nithology, first *The Birds of Burma* in 1940, followed by *The Birds of Borneo* in 1960. Thanks to the meticulous labors of Geoffrey Davison, we now have the fourth edition of the latter, and what a fine handbook it is. It remains a large tome (6.5 pounds, with a trim size of 7 × 10 inches). It is an ideal desk companion to one’s field guide of choice (I suggest MacKinnon and Phillipps 1993). It is quite updated, but has not shed all of its intriguing and affecting earlier features, such as a wide array of introductory chapters covering migration, biogeography, birds and humankind, conservation, the life history of cave swiftlets, hornbill ritual, and Iban augury (penned by various expert contributors).

The core of the book, of course, is its species accounts and plates. The accounts are typical of the old-school handbooks, which is of great value today for those desiring in-depth information on a species’ life history. Included is global and local range, history of collection and observation of the species in Borneo, a brief description, voice, habits, nesting, and racial variation. Some groups (e.g. sunbirds, flowerpeckers) have keys to identification. Some accounts (e.g. Crested Fireback Pheasant [*Lophura ignita*]) are quite long, whereas others (e.g. Dulit Frogmouth [*Batrachostomus harterti*]) are brief. This variability is apparently a product of available knowledge as well as the revising author’s interest in a particular taxon.

Description of vocalizations is detailed and appears comprehensive. Notes on foraging behavior and habitat selection also appear to be quite authoritative. Having the nesting data are a bonus typically absent from field guides. The plates are clumped in the back of the book, preferable to the old system of scattering them through the text. Painted by A. M. Hughes mainly in the late 1950s, they are good, but are not comparable with what is being produced for the region today for the field guides (e.g. Robson 2000). In any event, this is not a field guide, so what we have is perfectly adequate to give the reader an excellent feel for the Bornean avifauna.

The book's back matter includes a distributional table, listing each species and indicating in which of 13 Bornean subregions it occurs (this includes six fringing island groups). That is a very useful tool for birders and researchers planning to visit particular localities. Also included is a 20 page history of ornithology of the island (updated to the present). Within this is a compact listing of the important museum collections of birds from Borneo. This is followed by an extensive bibliography (34 pages!). This in itself is invaluable, as it is both comprehensive and up-to-date. Finally, there is a biography of B. E. Smythies, which makes clear that this remarkable naturalist was actively involved in preparation of this fourth edition, at the age of 87. He did not live to see the final product, but I believe he would have been proud of this splendid bird book, in the old tradition, but with a late twentieth century refurbishing. I recommend it to those who collect bird books of Asia as well as libraries with ornithological collections featuring the Old World.—BRUCE M. BEEHLER, *Asia-Pacific Division, Conservation International, 1919 M Street Northwest, Suite 600, Washington, D.C. 20036, USA. E-mail: b.beehler@conservation.org*

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