

Reviews

BIRDS OF SOUTH ASIA – THE RIPLEY GUIDE

By Pamela C. Rasmussen and
John C. Anderton.

Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, 2005.
Two volumes; 1,061 pages; 180
plates; 1,450 distribution maps,
line diagrams, sonograms, etc.
ISBN 84-87334-67-9.
Hardback, £55.00.

In recent years, birders travelling to the Indian subcontinent have had at their disposal two excellent field guides, using largely standardised nomenclature and taxonomy but following different species sequences: Grimmett *et al.* (1998) adopted that of Inskipp *et al.* (1996), while Kazmierczak & van Perlo (2000) followed the traditional Peters sequence. With this new work, a third option is available, using the older, Peters-based sequence, but with a considerably altered nomenclature and an even more radically modified taxonomy. The project was conceived and launched by the American ornithologist S. Dillon Ripley, who died in 1996. Long-term illness forced Ripley to enlist two of his associates at the Smithsonian Institution, Pamela Rasmussen and John Anderton, to continue the project.

The scope of this work encompasses India (including the Andaman and Nicobar Islands), Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Lakshadweep, Maldives and Chagos Islands. Vol. 1 comprises the field guide, while Vol. 2 is subtitled 'attributes and status'. A total of 1,441 species are included, compared with c. 1,300 in the two field guides mentioned above. Although the geographical scope exceeds these earlier works, this increase chiefly reflects around 130 taxonomic changes. Almost all are the result of the upgrading of previously recognised races to distinct species, although many have been adopted without reference or justification. Furthermore, some species

included in the earlier works are excluded here, on the basis that the authors consider the observations to be unproven or unreliable.

Scientific names mostly follow Ali & Ripley (1983), with some changes adopted by Inskipp *et al.* (1996). There are other changes though, with many of the laughingthrushes recently grouped in *Garrulax* being reassigned to several older genera. Each taxonomic split introduces at least one new English name; for example, the former Pompadour Green Pigeon *Treron pompadora* now becomes four species, each with a new English name.

Vol. 1 contains 180 plates, 70 of these by John Anderton, including four flight illustrations in blackish/sepia-and-white – surely colour would have been worthwhile? A further 11 artists were commissioned to produce the remainder. Inevitably, the styles vary somewhat, though less so than in some comparable guides. Most illustrations are good, but some just do not look right, for example the pipits *Anthus* on plate 102, which seem to have abnormally small heads, several of the bulbuls (Pycnonotidae) on plate 106, and some of the flycatchers, notably White-gorgetted Flycatcher *Ficedula monileger* on plate 123 and the male Snowy-browed Flycatcher *F. hyperythra* on plate 124. To my eye, there is an inconsistency throughout the plates in the intensity of rufous tones, some being too bright and some too reddish. The accompanying texts vary greatly in length and detail, with up to 170 words for each of the harriers *Circus* but a miserly 30 for some pipits. The 27 words describing Great Black-headed Gull *Larus ichthyaetus* wrongly imply that all ages have a black subterminal tail-band. Vocalisations are not dealt with, which is a major shortcoming if Vol. 1 is used on its own in the field. The distribution maps are small but easy to interpret, and often include useful

snippets on status, habitat and geographical variation.

Vol. 2 includes an appreciation of S. Dillon Ripley, followed by introductory sections and acknowledgments, the main species accounts and sonograms, along with ten appendices, selected references and an index. Although both are named as authors, Rasmussen was responsible for the preparation of the bulk of the text, while Anderton co-ordinated the production of the plates. The introductory pages include sections on coverage, geography and avifauna, moult and plumages, measurements, illustrations, identification, vocalisations, taxonomy, maps, records, history of ornithology in South Asia, and conservation. The content of each of these sections is much as expected but, in places, becomes turgid and hard to grasp in one reading (one sentence on page 12 has 162 words). The section on taxonomy outlines the authors' thinking behind the substantial changes they have introduced. These include no fewer than 203 species-level changes from Ali & Ripley (1983) and 131 from Grimmett *et al.* (1998). In some cases, the changes have been widely anticipated and will be warmly welcomed; but there are many instances where the evidence to justify the decision remains inconclusive, and a fair few where that evidence is pretty flimsy.

All 1,441 species reported within the region are covered. Of these, the occurrence of 1,298 species is established beyond doubt and these are known, or assumed, to occur regularly. A further 58 are vagrants, with at least one confirmed record each. Unfortunately, the authors considered that records of no fewer than 85 species in the region were 'hypothetical' and that all claims remain unproven. In the records section, the authors explain that a large number of published field observations and sight records (presumably appearing in bulletins, trip reports and site lists as well as respected journals) without

full supporting details must be treated as being unreliable, although they have apparently made little effort to track down observers for further information. Doubtless this reflects the fact that the authors are primarily museum workers. They bemoan the fact that Sri Lanka is the only country in the region with an established Records Committee (yet the only claim of White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis* for the region came from Sri Lanka; it was rejected by that country's Records Committee, but it still appears in this book as a 'hypothetical' species!). All the so-called 'hypothetical' species are included within the main section of the book, complete with a full species account, but on a darker background. Also included, with rather shorter accounts, are a further 67 species which occur close to the boundaries of the region, but which have yet to be found within them. In this respect, many more migrants could equally well have been included.

The variety and importance of songs and calls, and the great value of recording them, are discussed at length, while the structure, parameters and interpretation of sonograms are explained in great detail. Each species account in Vol. 2

includes detailed written descriptions of all or most of the known vocalisations, and one or more sonograms are shown for 886 species. I suspect, however, that few birders can interpret sonograms and also that few who regularly make field recordings onto tape or minidisc have the facilities to convert their recordings to sonogram. Sonograms are not included for a number of families for which they would surely be useful, such as woodpeckers (Picidae), pipits and rosefinches (Fringillidae).

There is no doubt that this work represents a major contribution to South Asian ornithology, but it seems unlikely to displace the established market leaders in the field-guide market. I feel that the two books would have been more commendable if produced as one larger format book, with a larger font size and larger plates and maps, possibly with a spin-off field guide, including notes on vocalisations, to come in the future. Just how widely accepted the wholesale changes to taxonomy will become remains to be seen. In some cases, further studies are clearly needed, and the many changes to nomenclature and reversion to an older species sequence are likely to cause considerable confusion to field-

workers and birders alike, and perhaps disarray in the various relevant journals for the foreseeable future. Despite the authors' reasons, the wholesale rejection of so many undoubtedly valid recent field observations is unfortunate. This attitude will do nothing to encourage observers to publish their observations, or submit records to the relevant regional or national authorities for review and verification.

References

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Nick Dymond

PELICAN BLOOD

By Cris Freddi.
 Fourth Estate/Harper Collins,
 London, 2005. 266 pages.
 ISBN 0-00-718518-9.
 Paperback, £10.99.

With recent books such as *Tales of a Tribe*, *Beguiled by Birds*, *A Bird in the Bush*, *Whose Bird?* and *Birds Britannica*, some of us appear to be taking stock of our birding heritage and almost longing for days gone by. Cris Freddi's exciting debut novel *Pelican Blood* adds to this growing list of ornithological retrospection. The author was an active twitcher in the 1980s and has transported the characters, mood and ethos of the so-called 'golden

age' of twitching into a contemporary setting. So take donkey jackets, hitch-hiking, far-left political tendencies and the irregular use of mild narcotics and imagine them alongside internet birding, 'cheque book' twitching, pagers and recent taxonomic amendments.

The story revolves around three iconoclastic, super-cool characters that regularly car-share on the way to twitches. At the heart of the novel is a genuinely touching love story, but the bulk of the text is spent describing birds and birding. The author's underlying message recalls the early writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, in which an individual tries to give meaning to a life that basically has no meaning; in this case the characters attempt to enrich their meaningless lives by

obsessively birding and chasing a goal of seeing 500 birds in Britain. If such profound existential ponderings don't float your boat, you'll be glad to know that the story is packed full of murders, sex, drugs and rock n' roll.

So when that Oriental Plover *Charadrius veredus* is found on Shetland, take *Pelican Blood* with you because this gripping, moving and thoroughly enjoyable novel will make the hellish journey a lot less painful. Once you've read it, do pass it on to a non-birding friend, but just don't let them know that birders aren't really as cool as Freddi would like us to believe!

Tom McKinney

**THE NEW BIRDS OF
THE WEST MIDLANDS**

By Graham and Janet Harrison.
West Midland Bird Club, 2005.

496 pages; 69 colour
photographs; charts;
maps; gazetteer.

ISBN 0-9507881-2-0.
Hardback, £39.00.

In 1982, the stress of a new central English domicile was much eased by the arrival of *The Birds of the West Midlands*. As I began a new patchwork in Needwood Forest, I had an excellent compendium of local ornithology at my right hand. It has, however, aged. Word of a major updated version came as the new millennium dawned, and here it is. Its size and format are remarkably similar to the original. How have the contents changed?

First, the new book moves the ornithological clock smoothly on, dealing chiefly with the period from 1979 to 2001. The specific texts include a few later records, dated up to 2004, but the charts display analyses from only the main 23-year period. The maps show more-recent distributions, from 1997 to 2001. Second, the introductory chapters have multiplied and now describe separately the history of the West Midland Bird Club (WMBC) from 1929 to 2004, the regional context of climate and weather, bird movements into and out of the region and its 'changing profile'. The last is a much revised description of the region's faunal areas. Where once there were seven, there are now 11, and the individual essays upon them are greatly interesting, making even sharper sense of the

region's habitats than in the first book. Third, the main systematic list contains updated texts for all the wild birds (in Categories A, B and C) recorded in the four counties (Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire and the West Midlands). Of the 345 species, 31 are new. These new species and other true rarities have their records listed in brief but the other, commoner species are the subjects of full prose essays. These begin usually with early regional history but go on to describe recent status, population density and distribution, ending with movements and signal ringing recoveries. The accompanying charts highlight such themes and also list the best sites for waterbirds. Importantly, the ever-growing WMBC data store has again been interweaved with BTO and other conservation studies. Finally, the region's Category D species and escapes are redefined.

Altogether, the continuing commitment and competence of the authors and the WMBC's other long-serving sages shines out. A striking example of their concerted knowledge occurs in the Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* text. According to the Rare Breeding Birds Panel, the West Midlands population is fewer than 120 pairs but in the view of local assessors it is actually not less than 200 pairs. There is other good news in the book.

Why then do I experience some disappointment? Never having joined the WMBC, I feel nothing for its region of four counties. It is Staffordshire and its birds that attract me and often as I searched for a sharp county focus, it escaped me. Unlike its predecessor, the new

book omits a full series of even breeding maps. So, in spite of frequent mentions of county shares (of regional record totals) and occurrences at reservoirs and other key sites, the current community of Staffordshire's farmland birds was largely indecipherable. As a maverick observer, I had better not go on with such comment, but surely it is sad that my ancient county's last bird book is now over 40 years out of date. Is it such lost connections that have caused the authors to note that against a doubling of regional club membership from 1970 to 2000, the number of fact-contributing observers has grown by only 25% in the last 25 years? The Harrisons also note wistfully that the modern multicast of rare-bird availability has reduced 'local patch' recording.

Enough of worries, back to the book. Michael Warren's vibrant cover is actually a morality tale. The 33 Ruddy Ducks *Oxyura jamaicensis* that swan so boldly on the 1982 cover are reduced to a skulking pair, and ten politically correct Grey Herons *Ardea cinerea* now take the main stage (the Grey Heron has also replaced the Ruddy Duck in the Club's new logo). Equally attractive are the charming vignettes by Steve Cale and the telling series of habitat and bird photographs. Indeed, the book's overall appearance is a real advance on the design of its ancestor, increasing its legibility. I hardly need commend it to the WMBC loyalists, who will have already bought it, but I do so to the thousands of other observers interested in English birds. It deserves wide readership.

D. I. M. Wallace

BIRDS BRITANNICA

By Mark Cocker and Richard Mabey. Chatto & Windus, London, 2005. 518 pages; over 400 colour images, mainly photographs. ISBN 0-701-16907-9. Hardback, £35.00.

This is without doubt one of the most difficult books I have had to review, although this had more to do with its sheer size, and the scope and complexity of its content than anything else. I realised early on that this is not the sort of book that you read from cover to cover, so I dipped and delved at intervals,

as the mood took me, spurred on several times by spotting it on prominent display in bookshops, and by its appearance in newspaper bestseller lists. The end result has been a feeling of some awe; it is a magnificent achievement. I am not at all surprised to learn that it took over eight years to put together. It

is wonderfully and copiously illustrated, and by today's standards very reasonably priced. Despite the stated authorship, it is very much Mark Cocker's work, although it is important to realise that a lot of other people have been involved too. In his introductory text, Mark pays great and well-deserved tribute not only to the editorial team as a whole but also to the innumerable birders and members of the public who have contributed material to the book. The source notes alone at the end run to 17 pages, with three more listing special acknowledgments. Such enthusiastic participation in compiling a bird book may not be unique, but it is both impressive and wonderful.

The book essentially follows the ideas and the format of the award-winning *Flora Britannica* by Richard Mabey. Species by species, it gives us an insight into the rich and varied association we have with birds, not just from a birding or ornithological standpoint (though these aspects are well covered) but also in terms of how birds have impinged upon our social history and how they have

appeared in art, literature and folklore. The 350 species entries which make up the bulk of the text vary considerably in length, content and detail, ranging from several pages down to just a few lines – and I do feel that some of the rarities included here (such as Greater *Charadrius leschenaultii* and Lesser Sand Plover *C. mongolus*) are a bit out of place and could join the others listed in the first Appendix. There is a huge wealth of information and comment here, and there are so many accounts that I find fascinating; for example, those on Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus* and Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*, to name just two. I am glad that 'non-birds', including Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* and Red Grouse *Lagopus lagopus* (and the much maligned Feral Pigeon *Columba livia*), are given such full treatment, but a little disappointed that such a charismatic species as Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* merits only about one page. There are two curious Appendices – a list of bird-related pub names and one of Welsh bird-names; make of these what you will!

I suppose no book of this size

could be without errors or anomalies, but I have to say that they seem few and far between. My old Edinburgh birding haunt of Duddingston Loch has become 'Loch Duddingston' and (another Edinburgh reference) the famous White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* breeding record of almost 600 years ago is said in the text to be the only one – while an accompanying photo caption states that there was also an attempt in West Yorkshire in 2004. Perhaps these inaccuracies are both down to sloppy editing. These are minor quibbles, however, as is my purely personal view that our new standardised English bird-names (which head each account) do not sit well with species stories dealing so much with past associations.

I have absolutely no hesitation in saying that this is a truly splendid book; you must dip into it yourself, frequently, to find out what I mean. You should buy it too; it will give you endless pleasure and a much deeper appreciation and understanding of birds and people than you had before.

Mike Everett

**IN A NATURAL LIGHT:
THE WILDLIFE ART OF
CHRIS ROSE**

By Chris Rose. Langford Press,
Wigtownshire, 2005.
143 pages; 57 colour plates
and numerous sketches.
ISBN 1-904078-16-8.
Hardback, £35.00.

Most *BB* readers will be familiar with the work of Chris Rose. Chris has worked as an artist and illustrator for more than 20 years and his work has earned him critical acclaim within the pages of this journal on several occasions. For example, reviews of his paintings in *Grebes of the World* appeared in *Brit. Birds* 96: 266 and, most recently, his illustrations of cotingas (Cotingidae) in *HBW* Vol. 9 were described as 'breathtaking' (*Brit. Birds* 98: 498). It is satisfying

to note that *British Birds* recognised his talent back in the 1980s when he was chosen as 'Bird Illustrator of the Year 1986' (*Brit. Birds* 79: 319–325).

Two or three years ago, I had a stall opposite Chris Rose's at the British Birdwatching Fair at Rutland Water, and had a few days to soak up a splendid painting entitled *The Greeting*. It was a beautifully lit study of two Fulmars *Fulmarus glacialis*, which captured that short burst of raucousness emanating from the reunion of the pair. I thought it was as good a painting as you get, and seeing it again in this book I am still inclined towards that view.

This book requires only a short review. It is everything a good bird art book should be. The production is high quality, printed on good paper, with excellent colour reproduction and a spacious and

elegant design. Of large format, almost every double-page spread features a painting, around 57 in all, each accompanied by the artist's narrative. It is refreshingly non-mystical, explaining all manner of thoughts on the painting: the concept, inspiration, problems, solutions, techniques, doubts and struggles, delights and surprises – all delivered with honesty and humour. Bird art books increase in interest with the written word. The ins and outs of each plate, coming directly from the artist are, to me at least, fascinating. Adding further to this insight is the preparatory design work, coloured field or studio sketchbook pages that appear alongside a number of the paintings.

I hesitate to launch into a critique of the work of Chris Rose; is that the role of a book reviewer?

Surely not. Nevertheless, the essence of the book IS his paintings, so I should give a flavour of what to expect. Chris Rose is clearly fascinated by light (and particularly its effects over and within water) and has developed considerable skills as he endeavours to get it down on board in acrylic or oil. His (often large) paintings are

always bold in design and well observed. Chris delights in contrast and daring use of colour, and many paintings have a richness that is quite sizzling. The more subdued compositions work equally well and are reminiscent of Bob Bateman's work in style, especially the snow scenes. I daresay that in a collection such as this you will

probably not find every one to your taste, but there is no doubt that there are many beautiful paintings here which will delight. I suspect that once you see this book you will realise that you need to have it!

Alan Harris

**BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY:
CHOOSING THE BEST
DESTINATIONS, PLANNING
A TRIP, TAKING GREAT
PHOTOGRAPHS**

By David Tipling, Guild of
Master Craftsmen Publications,
Lewes, 2005. 190 pages;
170 colour photographs; maps.
ISBN 1-86108-302-5.
Hardback, £22.95.

David Tipling is a name known to many through his high-quality bird and wildlife photographs, produced over a professional career which has now spanned ten years. In this somewhat sumptuous volume, David has combined what might have been two different books, the work incorporating both the technical aspects of bird photography and a section designed to inspire photographers to travel to destinations where he has found great photographic opportunities. Subtitled 'choosing the best destinations, planning a trip, taking great photographs', the theme of the book is to offer advice on the practicalities of all three of these components of great photography.

Throughout, the book is illustrated with superb photographs deservedly printed on high-quality paper. The selection of images used to illustrate the different parts of the book work particularly well, with the majority having captions detailing the equipment used, whether film or digital and camera

settings, while some also include additional comments on photographic techniques. Such little gems are extremely useful. Photographing birds is one of the fastest growing sectors in our bird-related hobby, aided in no small part by the digital revolution. Although only five paragraphs are devoted to digital and there is no in-depth discussion on the technique, digital photographers will do well to study many of the techniques and tips which are described in the section on taking great pictures. These range from approaching birds, to framing images and understanding the basics of depth of field. Everyone who picks up a camera and tries to photograph birds has something to learn, and this book offers something for all but the hardened professional who may just know it all!

The list of sites quoted is very much a personal choice and not a comprehensive inventory for any continent. There are, for instance, no major sites noted for Spain or Poland, both of which are mentioned in the additional sites paragraphs. Those included are certainly inspiring, though be warned, a trip to most will make a large dent in your bank balance. The list of British sites is highly skewed towards seabird islands/colonies, with seven out of ten sites mentioned relating to this subject. Treatment of sites varies, with up to four pages and up to five photographs of the place and/or its special birds. Site details include an introductory descrip-

tion of the main habitats and principal attractions for bird photography, including the light and weather conditions conducive to creating good results. The information on when to go includes basic timing, while the section on travel and accommodation provides general information, although several websites are listed for further study. Details of places that I know seemed good, and certainly those along Varanger Fjord, Norway, agreed with my recent June experience.

If the success of a book is measured by its effect upon the reader, then this volume scored highly as it has made a real impact on my approach to photography. It has made me look again at all aspects of my own technique and has provided tremendous inspiration; I have even bought a hide! But even if you are not a photographer, there are tales recounted and images displayed which will make you think again about just how fascinating the birds which we all admire are, and will show you to what lengths some people will go to get those great images at which we gaze and say 'I want to go there' or 'I want to take a picture like that'. This book sets out to inspire and assist, and in these twin aims it succeeds by showing off the superb work of this talented wildlife photographer.

Graham Catley