Book reviews

Where a reviewer’s name is not given, the comments are those of the book review editor, Derek Toomer.

RATITES AND TINAMOUS

S.J.J.F. Davies, illustrated by Mike Bamford and Danika Loomes
Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002. ISBN 0-19-854996-2, 310 pp., hardback £49.50.

This is the ninth volume in the Oxford Bird Families of the World series, covering the tinamous, and seven families known collectively as ratites (rheas, emus, cassowaries, kiwis, ostrich and the 5–7 extinct species of elephant birds from Madagascar and 13 extinct species of moas of New Zealand). It follows the standard format, with seven introductory chapters covering evolutionary relationships, functional anatomy, feeding ecology, non-breeding behaviour, mating systems, mythology, human exploitation, and conservation issues. The second part of the book covers the 57 species accounts.

The introductory chapters contain some fascinating pieces of information. Three examples: elephant bird eggs from Madagascar have been found along Australia’s western coastline, to where they must have floated 8000 km through the southern Indian Ocean. Elephant birds, moas and kiwis evolved from ancestors that flew (or, as one hypothesis suggests, swam) to Madagascar and New Zealand before evolving flightlessness. Emperor Heliogabalus of Rome (202–222 AD) once served up ostrich brains at a feast.

However, they are, in general, disappointing, being a collection of facts and reports, with little synthesis, analysis or original interpretation. For example, Davies reports that cassowary casques are believed to help the birds push through the tangled vegetation of their rainforest habitat, or possibly for turning over leaf-litter in search of food. A more likely explanation is that they evolved, along with brightly coloured facial skin and wattles, as a result of sexual selection.

Ratites and tinamous have extraordinary mating systems, with all but Ostrich and a subspecies of Brown Kiwi showing sex-role reversal (with male parental care, and female competition for males). However, there is little discussion of the interesting hypotheses to explain this and limited discussion of Brian Bertram’s fascinating study of the unique Ostrich breeding system and how its differences may have evolved.

Much work on moas and elephant bird fossils has been published describing the fascinating inferences that can be made about their distribution, ecology, breeding behaviour and mating systems. However, this subject is barely mentioned here, and the species and genera are merely listed under the species accounts.

One chapter almost entirely comprises 12 pages and an exhaustively detailed table presenting data from the author’s own study of the movements of emus along an emu-proof fence in Western Australia. A family monograph like this is not really an appropriate place to publish such raw data on a very specific issue. By contrast, the chapter on conservation is very cursory (< 2 pages), giving only the briefest of information on a handful of species, and with no reference to the detailed tinamou accounts in Threatened Birds of the Americas (Collar et al. 1994), nor the more recent accounts in Threatened Birds of the World (BirdLife International 2000) for the two cassowaries, four kiwis and seven tinamous that are threatened (including two listed as Critically Endangered: Madagascar Tinamou Crypturellus saltuarius and Kalinowski’s Tinamou Notoprocata kalinowskii), plus two rheas, one cassowary and four tinamous listed as Near Threatened). The desperate plight of these birds surely deserves more attention than the detail of a model to explain the distribution of emus along a fence.

In the species accounts, there are a disappointingly large number of unreferenced statements. All the species accounts quote heavily from the various accounts in Handbook of the Birds of the World (HBW), and for antipodean species, Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds, rather than from primary sources, adding little new other than exhaustive tables of food items (which could surely be summarized more effectively) and biometrics. In several places, example maps of territories or, for example, the distribution of emu nests at a single study site, are provided. These do not really provide any useful information, nor illustrate any point made in the text.

The species accounts contain a number errors, inadequacies and inconsistencies. To take just a few examples from the cassowary accounts: ‘Westermann’s Cassowary Casuarius papuans’ is given specific status, in contrast to its treatment in all relevant regional guides and in HBW and elsewhere, but there is no justification or reference for this move (and indeed, no section in the introductory chapters on taxonomic treatments within the various groups). A number of behavioural descriptions are wrongly referenced to Beehler et al. (1986) instead of Coates (1985). Both the large cassowary allopecies (Southern C. casuarius and One Watled C. unappendiculatus) are mapped as occurring in the southern part of the Vogelkop of New Guinea (and neither in the northern part), which is surely incorrect.

I presume that few people buy these Oxford family guides for their plates, but it is not unreasonable to expect them to be of a high standard. The 12 plates here are adequate, but are not particularly attractive, being very garishly coloured, and inferior to those in HBW.

Overall, I am not sure who will find this book useful. Someone wanting to read a general account of the families will find those in HBW to be more accessible, and in some cases, more detailed, with vastly superior illustrations. The specialist might use it briefly to identify some relevant primary sources, but the text is inadequate to rely on alone. The general birder is far more likely to use regional fieldguides covering these species.

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Also received

WHO KILLED THE GREAT AUK?

Jeremy Gaskell
Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000. ISBN 0-19856-478-3, hardback 227 pp. £18.99
A fascinating history of this enigmatic bird, tracing its discovery to its demise and expanding on the growth of conservation along its course.

THE ECOLOGY OF THE EGYPTIAN GOOSE AT HOLKHAM PARK, NORFOLK

Bryan Sage
The Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists’ Society. Norwich, 2002. ISBN 0375 7226, softback 56 pp. £1.50
The Egyptian Goose was first introduced to Britain from Africa in the late 17th century and its introduction to Holkham Park probably dates from the mid-19th century. There have been very few detailed studies of this species in the UK. While this study is restricted to the Holkham population, many of its findings will apply elsewhere. The study covers an examination of the birds’ breeding, feeding and behavioural biology, as well as looking at population statistics. An interesting monograph of an introduced species.

CONTAMINANTS IN BIRD EGGS IN THE WADDEN SEA

Peter H. Becker, Jacqueline Munoz Cifuents, Brigitte Behrends and Klaus R. Scmieder
Common Wadden Sea Secretariat, Wilhelmshaven, Germany, 2001. ISBN 0946-896X, softback 68 pp.
This study follows on from a pilot study in 1996–97. Since 1999, the entire Wadden Sea from Balgzand in the western Dutch Wadden Sea to Langli in the Danish northern Wadden Sea has been covered by 13 sampling sites to monitor spatial and temporal contamination of coastal birds. A number of residues, including mercury and organochlorines, were analysed in Common Tern and Oystercatcher eggs. The report covers the findings of interspecific variation, geographical and temporal trends, as well as considering the importance of bird eggs as indicators of contamination.

GEOGRAPHIC VARIATION IN SIZE AND SHAPE OF SAVANNAH SPARROWS PASSERCULUS SANDVICHENSIS

James D. Rising
Studies in Avian Population Biology No. 23.Cooper Ornithological Societ., Camarillo, USA, 2001. ISBN 1-891278-28-X, softback 66 pp. £7.00
The Savannah Sparrow is a species found throughout North America, from Alaska to central Mexico. The publication summarizes the findings of a study by the author of over 2280 skeletons, the many measurements of which were analysed. He reviews his results of geographical variation, as well as relating this to existing subspecies taxonomy.

SPOONBILL COUNT ON THE BANC D’ARGUIN, MAURITANIA, JANUARY 2000

Otto Overdijk, Claudine de le Court and Abou Gueye
WIWO, The Netherlands, 2001, softback 60 pp.
An account of the findings of the fourth Spoonbill count in Parc National du Banc d’Arguin, Mauritania. The area supports the endemic subspecies balsaci as well as wintering birds of the Northern and Western Europe breeding population of the leucorodia subspecies. A lot of information about Eurasian Spoonbill migration and survival was gathered from the presence of colour-ringed birds among the 9411 birds observed.

COUNTS AND ECOLOGY OF WATERBIRDS IN THE SIVASH, UKRAINE, AUGUST 1998

J. van der Winden, E.A. Diadicheva, W.T. de Nobel & M.W.J. van Roomen (eds)
WIWO, The Netherlands, 2001, softback 118 pp.
The Sivash is one of the most important wetlands at the northern Black Sea — important as a breeding, stopover and wintering site for huge numbers of waterbirds. The study summarizes the findings from August 1998 when assessments were made of waterbird numbers, as well as gathering information about feeding ecology of marsh terns, migration ecology of waders and habitat use by waterbirds.

SEARCHING FOR SLENDER-BILLED CURLEWS IN IRAN, JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2000

T.M. van de Have, G.O. Keijl, J. Mansoori and V.V. Morozov
WIWO, The Netherlands, 2001, softback 70 pp.
A report of the waterbird count of January-February 2000 at 20 wetlands along the Persian Gulf coast of Iran. Special attention was paid to looking for Slender-billed Curlew. Over 1200 Eurasian Curlews and 250 Whimbrels were individually checked, but no Slender-billed Curlews were observed. The counts revealed more than 53,000 waterbirds of 82 species, including several globally threatened species.

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