

The Ornithologist's Dictionary

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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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The Ornithologist's Dictionary.—Johannes Erritzoe, Kaj Kampp, Kevin Winker, and Clifford B. Frith. 2007. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain. 293 pp. ISBN: 978-84-96553-43-9. Paper, \$25.00.—“‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’ ‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’” (Carroll 1871).

The scientific study of birds, like every other field of human activity, has its own vocabulary, and anyone who wants to enter the field must become familiar with it. Over time, new terms are invented and established terms acquire new meanings. Hence the need for dictionaries, whose definitions are statements of current usage, sometimes with indication of the usage preferred by experts in the field.

Three large dictionaries of birds have long been available to English-speaking ornithologists: Newton (1893–1896), Landsborough Thomson (1964), and Campbell and Lack (1985). These encyclopedic volumes provide entries ranging in length from a phrase to many pages, often with explanatory illustrations. More recently, there have only been modest dictionaries for birders, and glossaries in a few reference books, textbooks, and field guides.

A new dictionary of ornithology is, therefore, to be welcomed. This small book, by an international team of experienced ornithologists, provides short definitions for more than 5,000 English words and terms pertaining to birds, birding, and ornithology. It is intended to serve advanced and novice students of birds, not only speakers of English but also those of other nationalities who are reading English. To enlarge its usefulness, the book includes many non-ornithological terms that users are likely to encounter (e.g., terms referring to animals other than birds, behavior, common food items, falconry, botany, mating systems, genetics, environment, diseases, paleontology, ecology, geography, natural selection, population, parasitology, statistics, and weather conditions). Outdated terms and nomenclature have intentionally been included, to some extent, to assist readers of older literature.

The definitions vary in length from a couple of words to several sentences. The long entries furnish information beyond that needed for understanding the meaning of the term.

American spelling and usage are given where they differ from British English.

The book's coverage is comprehensive and up-to-date, including, for example, current terms in systematics and the names of some recently discovered fossil birds. It also lists numerous rarely encountered technical terms that could have been omitted (e.g., autocoprophagous, epinagthism, faeder, kleptotily, monobrachygamic, nalospi, ornitholite, potamodromous, and semelparous). On the other hand, the book lacks a number of common terms that one would expect to find, such as the English and scientific names of families, adjectival forms of all family names (e.g., tyrannid), and species groups of modern birds.

The value of a dictionary chiefly depends on the accuracy and clarity of its definitions. Many of the entries in the present work are right on the mark—concise, correct, and clear. Others, however, are imprecise, unclear, incomplete, or even wrong. Comparative morphology, for instance, is the study of structural similarities and differences *in related and unrelated species with similar and different habits* (italicized passage added). The aftershaft, preferably “afterfeather,” is a part of a feather, not a vestigial feather, and it is commonly present on semiplumes and down feathers as well as on contour feathers. The entry for Humphrey-Parkes nomenclature for molts and plumages lists its terms plus their supposed equivalents in the traditional “European” scheme, but does not explain the essential differences between them. The wrist bones, the radiale and the ulnare, are not fused, unlike the remaining carpals. Some entries could be improved merely by attention to English, but others need amplification or correcting. It would have helped if the definitions had been checked by specialists before publication, but there is no indication that this was done.

Synonymous terms are given separately with slightly differing definitions, whereas it would have saved space simply to list one with a link to the other. The list of sources includes only six cited works, omitting others that are referred to. A list of dictionaries in ornithology and other fields, such as anatomy and ecology, would have been an asset. An appendix lists all the families of living birds (generally following Dickinson 2003) with their number of species but not the orders to which they belong.

The book is nicely printed and well made, though one would wish for a hardcover binding that would allow it to open easily and lie flat. Typographic errors in spelling and punctuation are few.

On balance, I consider this dictionary useful, well worth having for students and researchers in ornithology and for birders who delve into bird books. It could be called the best of its kind, yet that is faint praise because no other modern lexicon of ornithology seems to be available. Having the book at hand helps open the way into the ornithological literature by enabling one to look up terms that are unfamiliar or slippery in meaning.

It is good to note that Erritzoe hopes to produce a revised edition some time in the future. He cordially invites readers to send him their comments and suggestions.

Even with this book, the classic encyclopedic dictionaries are still invaluable for their extensive coverage and in-depth treatment of subjects. Previously owned copies of all three, even Newton, are available at reasonable prices from internet book dealers.—PETER STETTENHEIM, 168 Croydon Turnpike, Plainfield, New Hampshire 03781, USA. E-mail: peter.stettenheim@valley.net

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