

## **Handbook of Birds of the World, Volume 14: Bush-Shrikes to Old World Sparrows**

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**Handbook of Birds of the World, Volume 14: Bush-shrikes to Old World Sparrows**—edited by Josep del Hoyo, Andrew Elliott, and David A. Christie. 2009. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain. 896 pp., 51 color plates, 657 photographs, 485 maps. ISBN-13: 978-84-96553-50-7. 212.00€ (cloth).

With the arrival of the 14th volume of *Handbook of Birds of the World*, what new can be said in general terms that has not already been expressed by reviewers of previous volumes since the first appeared in 1992? This question is all the more relevant given the volumes' consistent format and annual appearance almost like clockwork. This regularity reflects well on the team of editors and assistants who ensure that the series maintains a uniformly high quality, each volume meeting the high standards and expectations set by previous volumes. Having written several sections of earlier volumes, I can attest to the attentiveness of the production team. Separate editors check the text, images, maps, and references, and are quick to interact with the author if there is any uncertainty or inconsistency.

A quick comparison with the previous volume, which covered penduline-tits through shrikes, shows that while the current volume includes about the same number of families, its 486 species are roughly 90 fewer, and consequently the number of distributional maps is reduced proportionately. There are nine fewer plates but 120 more photographs. One of the highlights of this series has been the excellent photographic coverage of the included taxa, with many shots showing aspects of behavior rather than being solely (admittedly often spectacular) portraits. Given some of the taxa included in this volume, this increased number of images is very welcome.

The families in Volume 14 are a rather varied lot, reflecting the considerable modification that this section of the traditional linear sequence has undergone in recent years. In two instances, this taxonomic variety entails the erection of monospecific families in recognition of the distinctiveness of a species or the uncertainty of its position (New Zealand Stitchbird, *Notiomystis cincta*, Notiomystidae; Bornean Bristlehead, *Pityriasis gymnocephala*, Pityriasiidae). At the other end of the spectrum from these geographically restricted families is the worldwide Corvidae (ravens and crows, magpies, jays), with 123 species, followed closely by the Sturnidae (starlings) with 112 species. Two other speciose families are restricted to the Australasian region but are of global interest, the Ptilonorhynchidae (bowerbirds) and Paradisaeidae (birds of paradise). Also largely sharing the same distribution are the smaller families Artamidae (woodswallows), Cracticidae (butcherbirds and currawongs), Callaeidae (New Zealand wattlebirds), Grallinidae (magpie-larks) and Struthideidae (regarded here as having priority over the usually cited name Corcoracidae; mudnest builders). Rounding out the coverage are three families of primarily African shrike-like birds (Malaconotidae, Prionopidae, Vangidae), Buphagidae (oxpeckers), Dicuridae (drongos), and Passeridae (Old World sparrows), the last starting the sequence of finchlike birds, which will continue into the next two volumes.

A problem facing such long-term series is the inevitable changes in taxonomy arising between the inception of the project and the appearance of the later volumes. The taxonomic sequence

selected at the start of the series has limited room for modification as the results of new studies appear, as reflected in the proximity in the same volume of families now known to be widely separated phylogenetically. The editors have shown great willingness to accommodate findings showing that species are misplaced, either by shifting them to a more appropriate spot (as with *Pseudopodoces*, which was transferred from the Corvidae to the Paridae in an earlier volume) or segregating them at family level (e.g., removing the Stitchbird into its own family when recent studies showed that it was not a honeyeater as traditionally treated). At odds with this practice is the retention of the cnemophiline “satin birds” in the Paradisaeidae (while Macgregor’s “Bird of Paradise,” now known to be a honeyeater, was treated with that family in the previous volume). Family-level mergers are less likely to be admitted, with the magpie-larks (*Grallina*) kept separate from the monarch flycatchers (Monarchidae), and the woodswallows (Artamidae) and butcherbirds and currawongs (Cracticidae) maintained as separate families. This practice does not strike me as a major concern, however, since the taxonomy sections of the family accounts address such matters. Nonetheless, some caution should be exercised in use of *Handbook of Birds of the World* as a sole taxonomic reference.

The format of the volumes should now be familiar: a family account with sections on systematics, morphology, habitat, general habits, voice, food, breeding, movements, relationships with man, and status and conservation. This is followed by individual species accounts, which repeat the topic sections. For little-known species, the account can be quite brief, with description of the plumage being the most extensive component. Familiar species, in contrast, may have accounts of a page or more. The small typeface allows dense packing of considerable information per page, but it can challenge those of us with aging eyes. For larger and/or better studied groups, these family and species accounts can be extensive. An idea of the extent of the coverage is evident from even a cursory examination of one of the families. For example, the family account for the bowerbirds is 42 pages, which includes 59 photographs. The 20 species are illustrated in two color plates and covered in 13 pages of species accounts and accompanying maps. The authors of species' accounts are well acquainted with the subject taxa, often having written extensively on them in the primary literature, providing confidence in the authoritativeness of the text.

Each family and species has its own list of relevant references. The combined bibliography for all accounts is a 70-page reference list with more than 6000 citations. One of the many appealing aspects of this series is the list of references for each family and species account, which provides a good preliminary step for literature searches. Yet, as previous reviewers have noted, the absence of citations in text for statements can be frustrating when the reader is trying to decide which of a sometimes extensive list of references pertains to a particular topic of interest. Still, this is a minor quibble.

There are several aspects of this series that can rightly be called highlights, and none more so than the photographs. These are uniformly excellent. Among the many portrait shots are species

rarely seen illustrated other than in drawings. The photographs go beyond portraits, however, with numerous images of nesting, bathing, fighting, and foraging. With the oxpeckers, starlings, and corvids in this volume, there is shown a range of species perching on an interesting array of mammals. Of particular note are the photographs of bowerbirds at their bowers and the extensive range of birds of paradise in display.

Another major drawcard for these volumes are the accompanying full-color plates. The series is well on the way to achieving the ambitious goal of illustrating all species of birds of the world. Where appropriate, the plates show both sexes of dimorphic species, more distinctive subspecies, and occasionally subadult plumages. Although within any volume these plates have been painted by several artists, they are all accurate and appealing.

Starting with volume 4, there has been a foreword—in reality an extensive essay—on an ornithological topic. These forewords have ranged across a diverse collection of topics, from extinct and fossil birds to species concepts, nomenclature and the history of classification, migration, acoustics, nonindigenous birds, and bird populations. In Volume 14, Stephen Moss, author of *Bird in the Bush: a Social History of Birdwatching*, addresses the theme of “Birding Past, Present, and Future—a Global View.” Historical aspects of birdwatching have been the subject of several recent books. This essay is a useful addition to the literature because it is a succinct treatment of the topic with a broad geographical perspective. Moss tracks the development of birdwatching through three main sections: Birding Past, Birding Present, and Birding Future. Under these headings, he examines the growth of the pastime in the United States from the beginning of the 20th century, when there were very few, often eccentric (or, at least, regarded as such) participants to the present, when more than one in five in adults participates in birding at some level, producing an annual economic impact exceeding 30 billion dollars. The “invention” and blossoming of birdwatching reflects the growing availability of field guides, improved communications, and better, easily obtained optics. Paralleling this development has been the expanding role of birders from observers to citizen scientists. Birdwatching in the United States and United Kingdom receives a proportionally sizeable amount of attention, but this provides a basis for comparison with its growth in the developing world, particularly as destinations, with the accompanying economic impact, and the rise of local participants. In the concluding section, Moss ventures ideas on the future of birdwatching in the face of such situations as climate change and increased worldwide security.

The combination of authoritative text, marvelous photographs and excellent color plates make working through this volume, like previous ones, a most satisfying experience. This series will certainly not replace the primary literature. But as a detailed summary of families and species of birds, and a starting point for entering that literature, it is an invaluable resource. A reviewer of a previous volume stated that *Handbook of Birds of the World* “must rank as one of the most significant ornithological publications of the late 20th and early 21st centuries” (McKechnie, *Condor* 111:580–581, 2009). I wholeheartedly agree with this assessment and look forward with anticipation for the final two volumes.—WALTER BOLES, Collection Manager and Scientific Officer—Ornithology, Australian Museum, 6 College Street, Sydney, NSW 2010, Australia. E-mail: [Walter.Boles@austmus.gov.au](mailto:Walter.Boles@austmus.gov.au).