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Birds of Ethiopia and Eritrea: An Atlas of Distribution

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Birds of Ethiopia and Eritrea: An Atlas of Distribution.—John Ash and John Atkins. 2009. Christopher Helm, London. 463 pp., 29 color plates, 26 black-and-white plates, range maps for all species. ISBN 9781408109793. Hardcover, $61.31.—Eritrea and Ethiopia, lands of the legendary Prester John of ancient mystery and of Emperor Haile Selassie I, are situated astride the northeastern corner of the African continent and project a landmass, the Horn of Africa, eastward into the Arabian Sea. The region has been an exotic destination for explorers, adventurers, itinerant travelers, and, more recently, birders. Although a few dedicated ornithologists, both amateur and professional, have sought out and studied the 872 species of birds (including 30 endemics), comprehensive publications about the region's avifauna have become available only recently.

Ethiopia's highland massif stands in contrast to the Danakil Depression, an inhospitable arid region in eastern Ethiopia, and the vast Ogaden Desert in the southeast, long the source of armed territorial disputes with Somalia. The coastline of Eritrea borders the Red Sea. The Dahlak archipelago is an island group in the Red Sea with seabird colony habitats.

Ethiopia and Eritrea were confederated into one nation by the United Nations soon after World War II. A long and tragic civil war resulted in independence for Eritrea in 1993 after a general referendum. There are significant religious and cultural distinctions

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between these two nations, but they are treated as a single geographic and biological region in this atlas and text.

Extremes of altitude and climate have created numerous microclimates and isolated habitats. Some of the habitat venues most interesting to ornithologists are remote and accessible only with great effort. Many stunning endemics have evolved in mountainous isolation over uncounted millennia. A few are quite local and rare, such as the sublimely beautiful Prince Ruspoli's Turaco (*Tauraco ruspolii*). This species is illustrated in a painting by Martin Woodcock on the front cover wrapper. The back cover wrapper features a photograph of Stresemann's Bush Crow (*Zavattariornis stresemanni*), another localized endemic, in addition to Woodcock's painting of the Black Crowned Crane (*Balearica pavonina*).

This volume is a pleasure to hold and to read. The hard cover and tight binding protect the book well, both in the library and in the field. This is not a field guide, but its durability allows it to be taken afield as a reference. As such, it can be referenced while using *Birds of the Horn of Africa*, also reviewed in this issue.

The main body of the book, which consists of range maps for every species known to occur or to have occurred in Ethiopia and Eritrea, is preceded by a fascinating chapter on the history of ornithology in the region, authored by Caroline Ash. Separate chapters treating the topography and hydrography of the region, vegetation, climate, bird habitats, migration, and breeding seasons are also presented in detail. There is a comprehensive chapter on general treatment of species represented in the atlas section.

A color gallery features 29 of the region's endemics on high-quality glossy paper. These photographic images add a field-guide flavor to the volume, but the main body of the work is a summation of what is known about avian distribution in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The book's meticulous and scholarly character is documented by nearly 25 pages of references in the bibliography.

Because of the region's vast area, often inhospitable climate, poorly developed infrastructure, and frequent travel inconveniences, data from some atlas blocks in the region are scarce or missing. This is a natural consequence when attempting to qualify and quantify the biology of such wild and inaccessible places.

A Checklist of the Birds of Ethiopia (Urban and Brown 1971) was the standard for decades, and many changes in bird distribution have occurred since publication of that book. *Birds of Ethiopia and Eritrea* reflects the enormous amounts of energy, patience, and field time that have gone into the final result, a work that brings up to date the knowledge of distribution and movements of birds known to inhabit this region. Africa is a vast and varied continent of sublime natural beauty, and this beautifully organized book is an essential tool for anyone interested in resident African birds, Palearctic visitors to the continent, and the diversity of avian life in Ethiopia and Eritrea.—Larry Schwab, *West Virginia University, Morgantown, West Virginia 26505, USA. E-mail: larryschwab@verizon.net*

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