

Birds of Ethiopia and Eritrea

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BOOK REVIEWS

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Birds of Ethiopia and Eritrea.—John Ash and John Atkins. 2009. A&C Black, London. 463 pp. ISBN 978-1-4081-0979-3. £45.00 (cloth).

Ornithologically, Ethiopia and Eritrea are very rich countries. No fewer than 872 bird species have been recorded, including 32 endemics—more than in any single country in mainland Africa. These range from bizarre monotypic genera like *Cyanochen* (the Blue-winged Goose) and *Rougetius* (Rouget's Rail) to no fewer than five endemic *Serinus* finches. This diversity and endemism are driven by equally remarkable topography. Ethiopia and Eritrea hold more than half of the land above 2000 m in the entire African continent, as well as the continent's lowest point at –110 m, in the Dallol Depression. Now, thanks to the work of John Ash, whose experience with Ethiopian birds dates back four decades, and John Atkins, these countries have a bird atlas that is as outstanding as their avifauna itself.

The book is a masterpiece; it is a must for all students and lovers of African birds. At 463 pages, it's large but not excessively so: you wouldn't carry it in the field, but it's a handy reference, not a tome. It opens with a glowing preface from Emil Urban, a foreword from Tewelde Berhan Gebre Egziabher, and extensive acknowledgments. The next 54 pages comprise short chapters, many of them written by contributing authorities: a general introduction, ornithological history (Caroline Ash), topography and hydrography, geology and soils (Geoffrey Last), vegetation (Atkins with Sue Edwards), climate, bird habitats, conservation (Atkins with Chris Hillman), migration, breeding, and an explanation of how the atlas is structured. Rather strangely, a chapter on banding (ringing) is tucked away at the back of the book. The opening chapters are followed by 16 color pages, half of them maps (Figures 6–16), the other half a gallery of stunning photographs of 29 of the 32 endemic birds by Hadoram Shirihihi and Nik Borrow.

The bulk of the book (pages 81–371) is devoted to accounts for each of the 872 species, three per page, with a map in a standard format and a paragraph of text for each species. The maps divide the region into quarter-degree squares (QDS), with distributions shown with symbols denoting four classes of records: confirmed and unconfirmed presence and confirmed and unconfirmed breeding. I estimate that about 100 000 QDS records are included in total, a phenomenal wealth of knowledge. The paragraphs include subspecies, status, distribution, altitude, habitat, and dates of occurrence; where there are only a handful of records, these are listed. They conclude with a sentence on breeding, a list of sites where the species is easily seen, and a summary of the QDS records. The book concludes with substantial end matter: lists of hybrids, additional species recorded immediately adjacent to the region, species for which records are considered unacceptable, and endemics. Appendices list Important Bird Areas, threatened species, species with distributions of <50 000 km²,

and species restricted to the region's five biomes; they include the aforementioned chapter on banding, a glossary, an impressive 1054-locality gazetteer, a comprehensive 1301-reference bibliography, and an index of scientific and English names.

It is inevitable that a few errors will have crept into a work of this magnitude. The “appendix” referred to on page 30 is in fact Table 1. Pages 40 and 44 disagree on how much of Africa's land >3000 m lies in Ethiopia and Eritrea (the former is correct). The reference to “Ash 1972” on page 46 should be to “Ash 1972a.” On page 49, the reference to the “Bird Migration” chapter actually refers to the chapter on banding. Page 61 notes the gazetteer as being on pages 381–408; it is actually 398–425. The “South Eastern Highlands” were omitted from Figure 8. The grayscale printing on the maps for the first 39 species is offset to the south by about a millimeter (in my volume). The text for the Scissor-tailed Kite (*Chelictinia riocourii*) notes “only three records for Eritrea,” but the map and QDS summaries show six. The notation of “endemic” is omitted for Stresemann's Bush Crow (*Zavattariornis stresemanni*). The map for the Fawn-coloured Lark (*Mirafra africanoides*) includes two unexplained square symbols. In the bibliography, “Butchart” is misspelled. The trivial nature of this list is testimony to the meticulous care that went into producing the book.

I also have a few mild criticisms of the structure and layout of the book. I would have combined the chapter on vegetation with that on bird habitats. To me the distinction between these two is unnecessary and confusing, especially when a biome classification is also added (Appendix 4). How do these classifications relate to each other? Conversely, it would have been good to see an introductory chapter on other biodiversity—the region's mammals and herptofauna are as remarkable as its birds (Williams et al. 2004). A section on taxonomy would have been helpful as well, maybe with notes in the species accounts where taxonomic treatments differ from those of other standard regional works. I assume that the maps and plates were aggregated for reasons of economy of color printing, but it would have been much more convenient if the maps had been placed alongside the relevant text in the introductory chapters, printed in two tones (like those in the main species accounts) if necessary. The most serious omission, in my opinion, is any indication of survey effort. The closest is Figure 4, which maps the 29 QDS for which no records exist, but this gives no insight into what must be huge variation in coverage among the other 450 QDS. It should have been possible, at the very least, to derive a map of number of visits, for example, as the number of dates that records have come from each QDS.

This volume joins a squadron of bird atlases for east Africa, which already cover Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda, with one in preparation for Tanzania (in this context, it's a shame that the authors didn't include Djibouti, which would have added a mere five QDS). But what is the future of such work? I have a

hunch that as the new millennium develops the documentation of bird distributions will forge a different track. Electronic platforms are now freely accessible wherever the Internet can reach. Imagine *Birds of Ethiopia and Eritrea* produced not as a book but as a website serving up its underlying data for exploration in GoogleEarth. At the click of a button, data could be viewed not just by species but by year, observer, genus, family, or order. Dynamic sequences could illustrate spatial patterns in breeding or migration within the year or trends over the years. Models could be derived to explore relationships with habitat, elevation, rainfall, or soils. New data could be uploaded by anyone with Internet access, stored as primary point localities, downloaded for analysis in desktop GIS if desired, and reported at any resolution (QDS or anything else) appropriate. We're not quite there yet, but I suspect that within a generation, ornithologists will come to see electronic atlases as the norm and will look on the *Birds of Ethiopia and Eritrea* not just in awe (Ash has banded 42 304 birds in Ethiopia!) but also in astonishment that atlases persisted into the 21st century in print form (see also Pomeroy et al. 2008).

And what might the spectacular avifauna of Ethiopia and Eritrea look like by that time? There is no doubt that discovery will continue. Ash and Atkins have provided a template of what we know, and so, by extension, also what we don't know. Many dramatic discoveries await: the Nechisar Nightjar (*Caprimulgus solala*) remains known from one wing and an unidentified swallow (*Petrochelidon* sp.) from sight records only. Lost species await finding: for example, the Black-backed Cisticola (*Cisticola eximius*) has not been recorded in the region since 1928, but its recent rediscovery in Kenya should inspire further searches in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Amazing new data have emerged from satellite tracking of the Northern Bald Ibis (*Geronticus eremita*) and Lesser Spotted Eagle (*Aquila pomarina*), data that, incidentally, present a new set of challenges for depiction in an atlas. Most advances will be more prosaic but still important. The hundreds of empty QDS in most of the species accounts represent a tantalizing challenge for ornithologists and birders in both countries. More data will reveal further range expansions, as with the fascinating situation with the golden sparrows (*Passer* spp.), as well as the less welcome spread of invasive species such as the House Crow (*Corvus splendens*). The chapters on breeding and banding reveal how much there is still to be learned about not just the distributions but also the life histories of the region's birds.

But even in Ethiopia, a country with a culture of deep respect for nature (Egziabher, in his foreword, notes "I doubt whether any Ethiopian rural boy ever escaped from being smacked if he ever stoned birds or threatened them in any other way"), the pace of loss may outstrip the pace of discovery. Rangeland degradation stands to give the Sidamo (Erard's) Lark (*Heteromirafra sidamoensis*) the tragic distinction of becoming the first bird on the African mainland whose extinction is documented (Spottiswoode et al. 2009). No fewer than 25 globally threatened species occur in the two countries. Climate change will worsen the situation (p. 37). The *Birds of Ethiopia and Eritrea* will doubtless play an important role in providing a baseline against which such changes in status can be measured and, hence, targeted responses developed. The development of a local community "site-support group" to protect the Berga floodplain and its White-winged Flufftails (*Sarothrura ayresi*) is a splendid example of what can

be done (p. 47). Maybe the book could even be used for more direct outreach focused on the region's wonderful birds and the importance of conserving them? What if the authors and publisher were to strike a deal with an Ethiopian newspaper to reprint one species map and account in the paper each day? The region's bird diversity is so great that such a series would last nearly three years! The broader the constituency that can arise behind the conservation of the birds of Ethiopia and Eritrea, the greater the chance that the outstanding avifauna—which Ash and Atkins have so painstakingly documented—will persist. —THOMAS M. BROOKS, Center for Applied Biodiversity Science, Conservation International, 2011 Crystal Drive, Suite 500, Arlington, VA 22202. E-mail: t.brooks@conservation.org.

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