
Birds of South Asia: The Ripley Guide

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Birds of South Asia: The Ripley Guide.—Pamela C. Rasmussen and John C. Anderton. 2005. Smithsonian Institution and Lynx Edicions, Washington, DC, and Barcelona. Volume 1: Field Guide. 378 pp. Volume 2: Attributes and Status. 683 pp. ISBN (volumes 1 and 2): 84-87334-67-9. \$95.00 (volumes 1 and 2, hardcover).

With the printing of the second edition of Ali and Ripley's (1978–1999) classic 10 volumes on the birds of the Indian subcontinent and neighboring countries more than 15 years ago, and the subsequent demise of both authors, it seemed inconceivable that anyone would take on the Herculean task of updating our current knowledge of South Asian ornithology. However, Rasmussen and Anderton have completed this monumental project by producing a two-volume book on the *Birds of South Asia*. This two-volume book covers all species (1441) and subspecies, totaling more than 2500 taxa, found in South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka), as well as two new areas (Afghanistan and the Chagos Archipelago).

Volume 1 is the field guide, divided into the following 4 sections: list of plates, how to use the field guide, the field guide itself, and a plate index to genera and group names with some blank pages at the end for note taking. The inside endpapers of the field guide provide a quick reference to plate numbers based on taxonomic groupings of birds. Over 3400 illustrations are depicted in 180 plates. The quality of the illustrations is quite variable because of the large number of contributing artists (12); however, the plates are generally very good. In particular, plates depicting the difficult-to-identify *Phylloscopus* warblers are superb. The size of the birds illustrated on each plate is large, providing easy identification of the distinctive plumage characteristics. Each illustration is accompanied by a distribution map, which includes breeding, winter, and year-round ranges, and migration routes with annotations on geographic variation, status, and a brief habitat descriptor. In addition, total-length measurement and a succinct description of the physical characteristics for each species appear beside each map. Over 1450 color maps of species and subspecies based on verified records are provided throughout the text. The 'How to use the field guide' section provides a very useful map with country boundaries, color-coded breeding,

wintering, and year-round ranges and migration routes, regional categories for illustrating subspecies, and plumage categories. Thus, this single volume has sufficient information to use by itself in the field.

However, to truly understand and appreciate South Asian ornithology and recent taxonomic changes in that region, one must also read Volume 2: Attributes and Status, as a reference text. The front endpaper contains a topographic map of the region covered in the text and the rear endpaper contains a very coarse map depicting habitat zones. Volume 2 opens with a listing of families and figures followed by a preface written by Dr. Bruce Beehler, which is a dedication to Mr. S. Dillon Ripley, Secretary Emeritus of the Smithsonian Institution. Mr. Ripley's life accomplishments for this region are impressive with numerous scientific publications, hence the reference to "The Ripley Guide." However, I was disappointed that the authors did not emphasize the many contributions made by Dr. Salim Ali, the doyen of Indian ornithology, who worked closely with Mr. Ripley for many years. Following the preface are brief biographies of the authors, Rasmussen and Anderton. The book is divided into three main chapters: Introduction, Acknowledgments, and the crux of the text—Species Accounts and Sonograms, followed by 10 appendices. Volume 2 concludes with an extensive reference section and a comprehensive index of scientific and common names. The introductory chapter is further subdivided into the following sections: coverage of the book, geography and avifauna, molt and plumages, measurements, illustrations, identification, vocalizations, taxonomy, maps, records, history of ornithology in South Asia, and conservation. Figure 1 (bird topology) in the introductory chapter should be placed in Volume 1, which is the field guide. Figures 3 (map of the number of breeding species within the entire region) and 4 (map of the number of endemic species within the entire region) would have greater utility if depicted in color, as shades of gray are more difficult to discern. Over 1000 sonograms are published, many for the first time, thus providing visual illustrations of vocalizations for most species. Unfortunately, the printed reproduction of the harmonics on the sonograms is very light throughout the text, making it difficult to interpret the structure of the harmonics. Therefore, the overall usefulness of including these sonograms is questionable. I found the section on Taxonomy particularly informative. One major difference between this book and other regional works is the number of species covered (1441). This difference largely results from taxonomic changes, and the number of species treated represents 203 species-level differences from Ali and Ripley (1983) and 131 from Inskipp et al. (1996). Some of these taxonomic changes are supported either by recently published or ongoing studies, whereas other changes are wholly based on the authors' opinions. Their rationale for this approach is that it "...will encourage field observers to take special notice (and documentation) of such taxa, rather than pass them off as 'just a race' of something they have already seen" (p. 25). Under the records section of the introductory chapter, the fraudulent records of E.

C. Stuart Baker and Richard Meinertzhagen are exposed. These two collectors have long been considered prominent ornithologists of the Indian subcontinent.

The bulk of the book (560 pages) is devoted to detailed species accounts. Each account includes current and alternate common and scientific names, identification, including subspecific variation, size, occurrence, habits, and voice. For species with recent or proposed taxonomic changes, a section listed as Taxonomy is presented at the end of the species account. The accounts are thorough, yet concise. From my reading of some species accounts, I found no errors in content or any omissions with the exception of the account of voice under Blyth's Tragopan (*Tragopan blythii*). According to the authors, the song is "...said to be very like Satyr and perhaps not distinguishable in field; documentation needed" (p. 130). However, having studied all members of the genus *Tragopan* for 10 years, vocalizations of Blyth's Tragopans have been documented and all five species are distinguishable both audibly and spectrographically (Islam and Crawford 1996).

Appendices include listings of hypothetical and rejected species, taxonomic changes, a glossary, a gazetteer of localities mentioned in the text, major birding localities and useful addresses and contacts, brief regional histories, major regional specimen holdings by museum, and a list of threatened species. I found most of these appendices useful and worth the extra pages.

The authors and publishers have succeeded in producing a well-researched, comprehensive, and compact field guide and reference book. However, two major shortcomings of this two-volume set are weight and font size. Volumes 1 and 2 weigh

approximately 0.9 and 1.5 kg, respectively. If the field guide (Volume 1) is published with a soft cover in a subsequent edition, its usefulness and portability for the field will be much enhanced. Font size of text for both volumes is far too small for comfortable reading. The extremely fine print of the text in the maps is even more difficult to read without a magnifying lens.

In summary, *Birds of South Asia: The Ripley Guide* is a long-awaited, detailed compilation of the most current information on the taxonomic status of birds in this region. The authors are to be commended for their attention to detail and accuracy. Readers will appreciate the tremendous time and effort that were spent to collect and integrate new data and to synthesize information from hundreds of publications. Ornithologists and serious birding enthusiasts will find this two-volume set a welcome addition to their reference library.—KAMAL ISLAM, Department of Biology, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306. E-mail: kislam@bsu.edu

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