

Advances in Caribbean Ornithology: Checklist of the Birds of Aruba, Curaçao and Bonaire, South Caribbean

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Advances in Caribbean Ornithology

Checklist of the Birds of Aruba, Curaçao and Bonaire, South Caribbean—T. G. Prins, J. H. Reuter, A. O. Debrot, J. Wattel and V. Nijman. 2009. *Ardea* 97(2):1–137–268. 21.00€ (paper). Available from the NOU treasurer (ekko.diny@planet.nl).

The Birds of Barbados—P. A. Buckley, Edward B. Massiah, Maurice B. Hutt, Francine G. Buckley, and Hazel F. Hutt. 2009. British Ornithologists' Union, Peterborough, UK. Xxvi + 295 pp. ISBN 978-0-0907446-29-3. £50.00 (world air price; cloth).

A Photographic Guide to the Birds of Jamaica—Ann Haynes-Sutton, Audrey Downer, and Robert Sutton. 2009. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, and Christopher Helm, London. 304 pp. ISBN 978-0-691-14391-0. US \$29.95 (paper).

In recent years the Caribbean region has seen a small cyclone of publications targeting birdwatchers and ornithologists. This is due in part to the financial support for introductory guides awarded by the Division of International Conservation of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service but perhaps more importantly to the growth and maturity of the Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds (SCSCB) and the growing local expertise of indigenous groups and resident islanders in the Caribbean.

The books reviewed here are fine examples of the depth and breadth of this increased interest in Caribbean ornithology. The *Checklist of the Birds of Aruba, Curaçao and Bonaire, South Caribbean* is presented as a special issue of *Ardea*. Located off the coast of Venezuela, these islands, as well as their sister islets of Klein Curaçao and Klein Bonaire, are former colonies of the Netherlands and have not seen a comprehensive treatment of their avifauna since 1983. The authors of the annotated checklist presented here seek not only to update previous lists but also to assess the increase in resident and migratory bird species reported from the islands, reveal changes in their abundance and status, and report on recently identified Important Bird Areas (IBAs). The enduring value of a publication of this sort is dependent on the completeness and reliability of the records. Most of these data appear to have been gathered as a result of occasional field work or from stored records of field biologists, various reports from observers and the Internet, and museum records. Some effort was evidently invested in evaluating these reports, but no criteria for acceptance or exclusion are given. This is critical in large part because of the reported increase in recorded species from 115 residents in 1957 to 168 in 2006, and 117 migrants in 1957 to 236 in 2006. While other islands have reported many new species resulting from increases in observers, quality of equipment, and identification techniques, these numbers seem remarkable, and a more complete explanation of acceptance and rejection guidelines is warranted. While a list of escaped yet unestablished exotics is perhaps needlessly included, a list of hypothetical species and species reported for the islands but rejected by the authors would have been of far more value and shed light on criteria for acceptance.

For each species the checklist includes a variety of names, a short description of its range, general habitat types occupied, status on the islands, and taxonomic considerations. Of greatest

interest are, of course, the status descriptions, which often include details of number of individuals, dates, and observers, especially for the uncommon or vagrant species.

Perhaps more consistent with the journal format of the publication, the authors present a variety of analyses based on these observations, such as measurements of similarities in avifaunal communities among the islands, temporal patterns of occurrence, and a summary of the distribution and abundance of six globally threatened or near-threatened species. The data are also used to support the listing of fifteen Important Bird Areas across the islands.

This publication is benefited by 31 photographs of geographic interest, but these are unfortunately labeled only by location with no further description of type of habitat or significance of place. In addition, 56 species are illustrated with quite acceptable—and some quite nice—photographs. These are distributed in four sections dispersed through the book, which some may find cumbersome as a reference. An appendix presents a list of species recorded on the islands as reported in eight studies since 1893. While it is useful to have a comprehensive list of all 236 reported species, I don't know what value the comparative data have when the "absent" species may just as likely represent missed species rather than additions (no species in this summary appear to have been lost from the community). Potentially more useful, yet missing from the publication, would have been a comprehensive map of each island with place names referred to in the text.

This is a well-produced and useful compendium of bird records from these islands, and represents a significant increase in species reported from the area. Clarification of standards of acceptance or rejection of data, and some analyses or commentary of the remarkable increase in species richness across the islands would improve its value.

The Birds of Barbados is No. 24 in the British Ornithologists' Union's checklist series—a series that is in many ways a model for how an annotated checklist should be presented. The BOU checklists have seemed to focus to some extent on islands, with several previously publications covering islands of the Caribbean or western Atlantic, including Hispaniola (No. 21), the Cayman Islands (No. 19), St. Lucia (No. 15), and South Bahamas (No. 8). *The Birds of Barbados* follows the now familiar and well-received format of its predecessors while adding some innovative and fascinating summaries that highlight this island's attraction of avian vagrants. As the authors point out, Barbados' isolation from the continents, its lack of high mountains, and generally dry climate may combine to depress the species richness of resident birds. Among the 263 recorded species, only one, the Barbados Bullfinch (*Loxigilla barbadensis*), is endemic, and only 12% are native breeders. But its location has attracted remarkable numbers of migratory and vagrant species. The vagrants derive from North America (48%), Europe or Africa (26%), and South America (16%), including some unique to the Western Hemisphere (2), the American Ornithologists' Union Check-list area (5), and the West Indies (15). Sixty species have only been recorded once or twice, giving an indication of the level of vagrancy on Barbados.

The introductory material in *The Birds of Barbados* is highly detailed and interesting. It includes sections on topography, geology and pedology, climate, vegetation and floristics, and other vertebrates. It includes an informative history of the island, along with a summary of conservation concerns. The avifauna is more directly addressed in a series of introductory sections that address historical accounts of birds on Barbados, including a fascinating look at enigmatic historical records. A comprehensive history of

museum collectors and field observers who have contributed to the island's ornithological knowledge is also provided.

Throughout the introduction and the appendices are many references to detailed comparisons of the avifaunal communities of Barbados, St Lucia, and the Cayman Islands. The authors suggest that "as the West Indies are blessed with two previous BOU checklists treating small islands . . . it is useful to compare the contemporaneous Barbados avifauna with theirs" (p. 32). But that is as close as we get to an explanation of these detailed comparisons, and such reasoning seems meritless. The take-home message of a depauperate avifauna and high numbers of vagrants seems simple enough that it does not need multiple tables of comparisons among islands just because they share a BOU publisher. More interesting are data on the origin and direction of arriving vagrants as determined by subspecific identification of the birds. Because vicariance has not played a direct role in the development of the island's avifauna, the authors use Barbados as an example of how dispersal has developed, and continues to establish, the bird community of an oceanic island. Equally valuable are the summaries of published studies detailing taxonomic changes among Barbados birds, unique sources of records of seabirds and shorebirds, and patterns of migration as determined by sight records, counts, banding, radar, and mist-net studies. The introduction concludes with a research agenda—an excellent idea, and while it may be expected of an annotated checklist, it is disappointingly dominated by taxonomic studies, many of which involve discrimination across wider regional or even global populations.

The species accounts of the *Birds of Barbados* are characteristically comprehensive, and as in other BOU checklists include local and scientific names, global and West Indian distribution, occurrence records from Barbados, breeding records, comments on taxonomic and other issues relevant to the species, and a source list for museum specimens.

The text is complemented by 12 tables and 5 figures and is generously illustrated with 78 plates. These plates focus on key birding sites and habitats, and while fine photographs, what strikes me is how utterly unremarkable the sites appear. These are small wetlands surrounded by agricultural fields or housing, shrublands, and fragmented woodlots. Photos also illustrate 35 bird species. Some of these are very nice, but since many document the occurrence of vagrants, many are not of the highest quality. Appendices also provide supportive data and analyses of material presented elsewhere. Here, for example, one may find the comparisons among elements making up the avifauna of Barbados, St. Lucia, and the Cayman Islands, details on the proximate geographical origins of the island's birds, Christmas bird count data, all band recoveries, and a gazetteer of local place names.

The Birds of Barbados appears to be extensively researched and thoughtfully presented, and it provides a wealth of data on many aspects of the island's birds. It should surely be the starting place for any studies of the distribution or taxonomy of birds of the region, and it will certainly provide guidance for more ecologically oriented studies as well.

Departing from the annotated checklist format in a handy book for the field-going birdwatcher is *A Photographic Guide to the Birds of Jamaica*. This attractive book replaces the long-popular *Birds of Jamaica: A Photographic Guide*, published in 1990 by some of these same authors. The goal of the authors of this current incarnation is a comprehensive guide to "all the birds likely to be seen (p. 7)," including "all of the bird species that have been reliably reported from Jamaica in the last 50 years (p. 36)." As a result, 220 of the island's 307 reported species are illustrated and covered in the species accounts. Surprisingly, given the stated goal, 77 species are only briefly described

without illustrations as vagrants in an Appendix, including many seabirds and neotropical migrants. The book includes brief introductions to Jamaican climate, geology and geomorphology, origin of the avifauna, breeding seasons, molts and plumages, conservation, and the history of ornithology. The book also covers migration, including the movement of some Jamaican breeding birds to South America during the nonbreeding period (which the authors incorrectly term austral migration), as well as altitudinal and daily movements. Major habitats are briefly described, including their typical avian residents, and are illustrated with high-quality photos. There is also a useful summary of travel information required by international visitors and a brief overview of places in Jamaica to look for birds. While these descriptions provide lists of some target species at each site, and the habitats present, directions for reaching each site are largely absent. Appendices other than the list of vagrants also include useful lists of endemic species, endemic subspecies, Caribbean endemic species and subspecies, a list of common and scientific names of plants mentioned in the text, and a list of species whose recorded voices are available. Throughout the book technical jargon is largely avoided or parenthetically defined, and the authors' use of descriptive language contributes to these informative and readable accounts. For example, in the dry forest "trees are spindly and shrubs spiny (p. 15)," impacted habitats include "ruinate woodlands (p. 20)," and birdwatchers may encounter the "jabbering calls of Jamaican Crows (p. 16)."

Species accounts are succinct and informative. They include alternative names, taxonomic (or, perhaps more accurately, status) notes, descriptions of the plumage of adult males, females, and juveniles, similar species, voice, and notes on habitat and behavior. A highlighted box describes the species' range, more

informatively its status in Jamaica, and a small range map that gives only the most general idea of the species' distribution within the island.

Of course, many field guides will be judged primarily by the quality of their illustrations. While I do not prefer photographic guides, the high quality of the photos in *A Photographic Guide to the Birds of Jamaica* has much to recommend. Birds are full frame, and colors are sharp and true. All photos are clearly captioned with the bird's age (adult, subadult, immature, juvenile) and sex, when appropriate. The month the photograph was taken is a frequent addition that helps in understanding plumage variations. In many photos a note is made of identifying characteristics; this too is very helpful and should have been used more widely, particularly as other field marks are obscured in the accompanying text. But it is the photos that are missing that I find most troubling. Too often there are only photos of perched adult birds in breeding plumage. This limitation is especially discouraging when seen among the winter visitors, many of which seem to have been photographed in April when their breeding plumage had already been acquired. More photos of other plumages and birds in flight would have added immensely to the value of this book.

Although this book fails in my estimation to be the comprehensive guide to all birds and all plumages that Jamaica deserves, it is still an admirable work that will prove popular with local and international birdwatchers. Its handy size, appealing photos, and pleasing layout will find many admirers, and it should help promote birdwatching on the island.—STEVEN C. LATTA, Department of Conservation and Field Research, National Aviary, Allegheny Commons West, Pittsburgh, PA 15212. E-mail: steven.latta@aviary.org.