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Author: Gardner, Charlie J.

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BOOK REVIEW

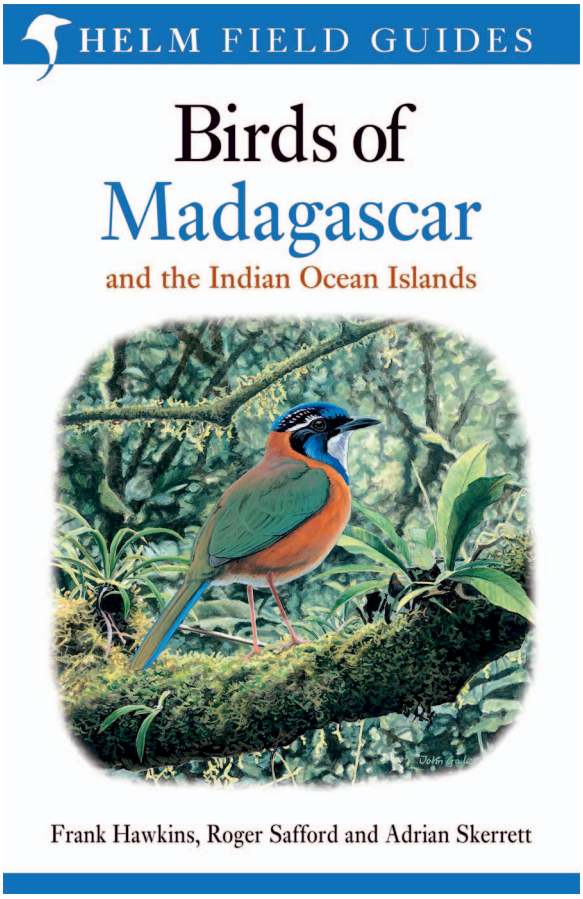
Birds of Madagascar and the Indian Ocean Islands: Seychelles, Comoros, Mauritius, Reunion and Rodrigues

Reviewed by Charlie J. Gardner

Durell Institute of Conservation and Ecology, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK
cg399@kent.ac.uk

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Birds of Madagascar and the Indian Ocean Islands: Seychelles, Comoros, Mauritius, Reunion and Rodrigues by Frank Hawkins, Roger Safford, and Adrian Skerrett; illustrated by John Gale and Brian Small. 2015. Helm Field Guides, Christopher Helm, London, UK. 336 pp., 124 color plates. $45 (paperback). ISBN 9781472924094.



Madagascar is famous for its unique, and often bizarre, biological marvels. In fact, along with its island neighbors in the Western Indian Ocean, it possesses the second most distinctive vertebrate fauna of the world's seven zoogeographic regions, despite being much smaller than the others. Although the bird fauna is not particularly rich, with only 382 regularly occurring species, an extraordinary 41% of them are endemic either to the region or to individual islands within it. Endemism is just as startling at higher taxonomic levels, with no fewer than 6 endemic families (containing 32 extant genera and 45 species) and 18 further endemic genera (containing 43 species). Two of these families, the cuckoo-roller and the mesites, are such ancient and distinctive lineages that they are now recognized as orders of their own, the Leptosomiformes and Mesitornithiformes. For these reasons and more, the region ranks high on most birders' must-visit lists.

And for those birders who do make the journey, there is a clear choice of field guide: this new Helm guide by Hawkins and colleagues. Not that the marketplace is crowded—there is only one other field guide covering the whole region, Ian Sinclair and Olivier Langrand's (2013) *Birds of the Indian Ocean Islands*, and the alternatives for Madagascar are now horribly out-of-date. Sinclair and Langrand's guide is certainly useful and served as my main field resource for most of the decade I lived in Madagascar, but it has the intensely annoying habit of unilaterally elevating certain subspecies to full species—such as the Moheli subspecies of Madagascar Green Pigeon (*Treron australis griveaudi*) and the Madagascar subspecies of African Black Swift (*Apus barbatus balstoni*)—despite a lack of supporting research. Not only did this create unnecessary taxonomic confusion, but it also left one questioning the authority of everything else the book said.

We can be sure of one thing about the new Helm guide: It is authoritative. For this is not just a field guide but is actually the offshoot of a much grander project, the mammoth 1,024-page bible on the region's avifauna, *Birds of Africa, volume VIII: The Malagasy Region* (Safford and Hawkins 2013). An edited

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volume with the species accounts for many birds written by the current authorities on the species in question, this was the first time our knowledge of all of the region's birds had been compiled, and it is truly a marvel. But at 4.7 kg, it is also one for the library, so the publication of this follow-up field guide is particularly welcome.

While the guide draws on the expertise of the region's ornithologists in a way that few others ever do, the authors have wisely avoided trying to stuff too much information from the larger volume into it. Nevertheless, they do offer a useful and comprehensive text for each species that is well thought out and covers only the key elements of identification, voice, status, habitat, and habits required to positively identify a bird in the field. The color plates are, for the most part, an improvement on those in Sinclair and Langrand, offering a greater number of illustrations per species (of, for example, different races, plumages, and behaviors) and more lifelike poses that better capture some of the essence of the birds. Having said that, the colors of many of the brighter species, such as the Madagascar Red Fody (*Foudia madagascariensis*), Madagascar Paradise Flycatcher (*Terpsiphone mutata*), and Common Sunbird Asity (*Neodrepanis coruscans*), are a little more drab and subdued in the plates than the birds tend to appear in the field.

For the most part, the book follows the standard field-guide format, with text and a map for each species opposite the corresponding illustrations. Its great innovation is in the order in which the birds are presented, for here it veers from the standard taxonomic sequence and arranges the birds of each island group separately, in effect producing a separate field guide for each destination. While this may seem an odd way of doing things and does take a few moments to get used to, it quickly becomes clear that this is an elegant solution to a vexing problem when a book covers several discrete bird communities. Quite simply, it is annoying for a birder in the granitic Seychelles (20 land bird species) or Mauritius (25) to have to sift through pages and pages of Malagasy birds to find the few species relevant to them at the time; separating them by island prevents the issue.

The guide is thus divided into three sections. The first essentially covers the nonpasserines (waterbirds, seabirds, raptors, and gamebirds), many of which are broadly distributed through the region and thus occur in many of the island groups. This section covers the region as a whole. The second section covers the passerines and is divided by island group—Madagascar, granitic Seychelles, coralline Seychelles, Comoros, Mauritius and Rodrigues, Reunion, and "outer islands" of the Mozambique Channel—each color-coded and thus easy to find in a hurry. In the final section, the vagrants are again presented for the region as a whole; not surprisingly (given the geographic spread of the region and its proximity to Africa), they seem to make up an enormous proportion of the region's birds. While there is a cost to this system—a few widely introduced species such as Madagascar Red Fody and House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) are repeated in several island groups—I'm sure it is a small price to pay for birders using the book outside of Madagascar.

Not wanting to appear too uncritical, I have looked for weaknesses in the guide, but overall this is a very good book. Perhaps one area that could be improved is the distribution maps: While these do show seasonality and (usefully) differentiate between core distribution areas and those where a species occurs at lower density, they are all produced at a large scale so that, while they show which islands a species occurs on, they provide no information about its distribution within each island. Of course, the introductory chapters provide reasonably comprehensive background information about each island and its habitats, including a map, and these give a good indication of the likely distribution of each species, but it's always nice to have detailed distribution information on the species account page. The introductory chapters also contain fascinating and up-to-date background information on the biogeography of the region's birds and a brief account of each endemic family and genus (including a list of putative "genera-in-waiting"), while the appendices include a checklist that covers numerous subspecies and is color-coded to highlight the status of each taxon in each island group.

Recent taxonomic changes to many endemic Malagasy species and genera mean that a new field guide to the region's birds was long overdue. The new Helm guide not only presents and explains these changes clearly, but does so in a beautifully illustrated, cleverly designed, and compact book—and, most importantly, a scientifically accurate one. This guide will prove essential to any resident or visiting birder and will, I am sure, long be recognized as the region's gold standard.

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Book Review Editor: Jay Mager, j-mager@onu.edu

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