

Reviews

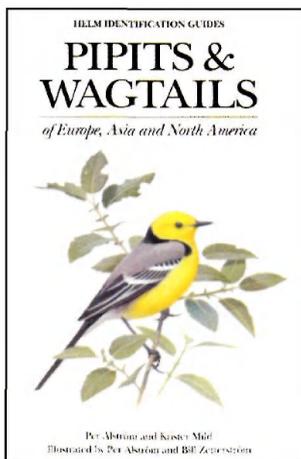
PIPITS & WAGTAILS OF EUROPE, ASIA AND NORTH AMERICA

By Per Alstrom and Krister Mild, illustrated by Per Alstrom and Bill Zetterstrom. Christopher Helm, A&C Black, London, 2003. 496 pages; 30 colour plates; 250 colour photographs; line-drawings and distribution maps. ISBN 0-691-08834-9. Hardback, £48.00.

Eagerly awaited for several years, this book is surely destined to become one of the finest in the Helm Identification Guides series, and closely follows the mould of the widely acclaimed *Sylvia Warblers*. The text is both authoritative and exhaustive, the plates generally excellent, and the liberal use of photographs and black-and-white illustrations add significantly to its value. The authors' stated objectives were to deal with all aspects of the identification of pipits and wagtails (Motacillidae) in the region and to provide a complete taxonomic review. If you are looking for information on breeding biology or behaviour then look elsewhere. All forms of pipits and wagtails found in Europe, Asia, North America and North Africa south to the Tropic of Cancer, including the Cape Verde and Atlantic Islands, are included: a total of 65 taxa. Other relevant taxa, such as the African races of Long-billed Pipit *Anthus similis* and the African and Antipodean 'Richard's pipits' *A. cinnamomeus* and *A. novaeseelandiae* (sic) are treated more briefly.

Taxonomic issues are very much to the fore and in one of the introductory chapters the implications of adopting different species concepts for the group are discussed: for example, White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* could be treated as one, two or even nine species! The authors adopt a monophyletic species concept, which allows polytypic species, and recognise 18 species of pipit and nine species of wagtail. Some may be disappointed that White Wagtail and Yellow Wagtail *M. flava* are both treated as single species, with nine and 13 subspecies respectively, although

recent molecular work suggests that the eastern group of Yellow Wagtails is quite distinct from the western group. The authors recognise only those taxa for which they could identify, in series, at least 75% of specimens of at least one plumage type – usually adult males. This means that fewer forms of Yellow Wagtail are recognised than in most recent reviews.



Other introductory chapters covering identification, moult and ageing highlight a number of useful points: the effect of wear on plumage; the impact of viewing angle on the prominence of some features, such as the loreal bar; and the variability in the extent of post-juvenile moult, both within and between species.

The species accounts themselves vary in length from just three pages for Berthelot's Pipit *A. berthelotii* to 50 pages for the White Wagtail complex. An identification section summarises the key features of each species (and subspecies where relevant) and the likely confusion species, and this is followed by

detailed descriptions. Although much of this information has now been published elsewhere, there is still plenty of new material, while treatment of some lesser-known species of Asian pipits far exceeds that available elsewhere.

Other sections cover systematics, measurements, wing-formulae, moult, ageing, sexing, voice, behaviour, distribution, habitat and a summary of other relevant identification literature. Several pages of sonograms, covering both song and call-notes, are presented for most species, including no fewer than 18 pages in the Yellow Wagtail chapter! Being something of a technophobe I find it easier to relate to renditions of calls and those provided here are among the best I have seen – an illustration of just how well the authors know their subject matter. Calls are, of course, critically important for the identification of some species, e.g. Blyth's Pipit *A. godlewskii*. I suspect that the claim that Richard's Pipits *A. richardii* never give a 'chep' or 'chip' call will, however, prove to be controversial.

The 30 colour plates are grouped together before the main systematic section. Typically, there are one or two species per plate, with an adult and first-winter illustrated in profile, and fresh and worn adults illustrated from the front and back. For comparative purposes, a few plates show a suite of species of the same age at the same time of year. The plates are generally outstanding, although the variation displayed by autumn Richard's Pipits is not really captured and some Rock Pipits *A. petrosus* of the form *littoralis* can certainly appear far greyer-toned on the upperparts than illustrated.

Forty pages of colour photographs are grouped towards the end of the book, with six photos to a page. These have been chosen specifically to highlight key identification features and, for example, there are 42 photographs of Yellow Wagtails and a dozen each of Buff-

bellied *A. rubescens*, Blyth's and Richard's Pipits.

One of the highlights for me is the wealth of information on the Yellow Wagtail complex, where intergrades receive a thorough treatment (although there is still much to learn about the identification of first-winters of many

forms). The authors urge considerable caution when identifying extralimital Yellow Wagtail taxa and almost go as far as to say that records of the forms *iberiae* and *cinereocapilla* should not be accepted from northwest Europe without ringing recoveries.

If you enjoy pipits and wagtails,

in particular the challenge of identifying them, then buy this book. Initially, it was envisaged that larks too, would be included, but they will now be treated in another volume. If its quality matches this one, let's hope it follows soon.

Paul Harvey

GREBES OF THE WORLD

By Malcolm Ogilvie,
illustrated by Chris Rose.
Bruce Coleman, Uxbridge,
2003. 112 pages; 24 colour
plates; colour inserts; line-
drawings; distribution maps.
ISBN 1-872842-03-8.
Hardback, £49.95.

I find it hard to categorise this slim, large-format book. It hardly fits the mould of modern 'identification guides', yet to dismiss it as a mere coffee-table book (whatever that may be) would be grossly unfair. On the one hand, I think it is distinctly bookshelf-unfriendly, but, on the other, I find it quite superb in terms of its text and pictures. For those of you unlucky enough not to have a review copy, it is, unfortunately, frighteningly expensive.

The book deals with the 22 modern grebes, including two recently extinct species, Atitlan Grebe *Podilymbus gigas* and Colombian Grebe *Podiceps andinus*. One further species, Junin Flightless Grebe *Podiceps taczanowskii*, is teetering on the brink of extinction and may soon join them. Tedious repetition of similar facts has been skilfully avoided by discussing aspects of grebe biology and ecology within the 11 introductory pages, while thorough appendices covering measurements and weights, breeding statistics, status and conservation priority follow. Next comes a section on the meanings and derivation of grebe names and, finally, a handy bibliography.

This has left the way open for Malcolm Ogilvie to use an essay

treatment for the 22 species accounts and, as you would expect from this author, these are authoritative, packed full of interesting information and highly readable. I learned a lot from them, even about the species I thought I knew reasonably well. Some of this is mouth-watering stuff indeed. I had no idea, for instance, that up to 1.6 million Black-necked Grebes *Podiceps nigricollis* have been estimated on Mono Lake in California. As a self-confessed dinosaur when it comes to changing and standardising vernacular names, I was brought up short by the discovery that 'Horned Grebe' is a much older English name than 'Slavonian Grebe' *Podiceps auritus*.

Excellent though the text is, it is probably Chris Rose's paintings that make this such a desirable volume, and they are obviously the reason for the large format. There is a double-page spread illustrating winter plumages, and some nice line-drawings, but these are overwhelmed by the big colour plates presenting portraits of each species in breeding dress. Grebes are very handsome birds, and the paintings more than do them justice. The artist's bold and adventurous treatment of light and shade, and especially of reflections in the water, has produced some quite remarkable results. It seems churlish to criticise any of them, but I do wish the Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps* was not disappearing into the centre fold of the book.

This, then, is a fine book. It is probably overpriced, but it would not surprise me at all if many people with a soft spot for these fascinating birds decide to buy it.

Mike Everett

BIRDS OF VENEZUELA

By Steven L. Hilty. Christopher Helm, A&C Black, London,
2003. 878 pages; 60 colour
plates; 7 black-and-white
plates; 44 colour photographs;
numerous maps.
ISBN 0-7136-6418-5.
Paperback, £40.00.

Although technically the second edition of De Schauensee and Phelps's *A Guide to the Birds of Venezuela*, this is effectively an entirely new book which simply incorporates Guy Tudor's colour plates and some other illustrations from the original. Steve Hilty has written a marvellous new text, while new colour plates have been painted primarily by John Gwynne, but also by Alejandro Grajal, Larry McQueen and Sophie Webb. Steve Hilty co-authored the first of the modern South American field guides in 1986 (*A Guide to the Birds of Colombia*), which has subsequently been the main reference for birders visiting most of the surrounding countries. Now, this splendid new guide is all that is required for travellers to Venezuela.

Introductory chapters cover topography, climate, biogeography, vegetation zones and habitat, conservation and national parks, migration, and a history of ornithological exploration in Venezuela. The 67 plates then follow, each opposite a page giving the captions and summarising the main identification features, preceded by the species accounts, most of which include distribution maps. The taxonomy is up to date, and acknowledges the 'splits' proposed by various authors, including those in

the *Handbook of the Birds of the World*. Species for which there is no specimen, photograph or sound recording (i.e. sight records only) are treated as hypothetical. Several species are thus 'square bracketed', including some of Hilty's own sight records (e.g. the only record of Red-tailed Hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*), but given full treatment nonetheless. For species such as Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis* there are now multiple sight records and Venezuela badly needs a records committee to assess such reports.

The species accounts are detailed and include sections on identification, similar species, voice, behaviour, status and habitat, range and, where relevant, taxonomic and other matters. I was particularly impressed by the voice sections,

which include onomatopoeic transcriptions of the author's own field recordings. These work very well and many readily brought to mind the vocalisations of the species with which I am familiar. The distribution maps are produced at a reasonable size and are easy to interpret, although I did notice a few records of which I am aware that were missing from the maps, mainly from the fishing camp of Junglaven, in Amazonas state.

As always, a guide of this nature is often judged primarily by its plates. When Guy Tudor's illustrations first appeared in 1978 they revolutionised our ability to identify many of Venezuela's birds accurately – especially those in such difficult families as the Furnariidae and Tyrannidae. Tudor

has moved on to even greater heights with his illustrations in *The Birds of South America*: presumably his commitment to that project prevented him from painting new plates for this book. The other artists involved here have done a commendable job. All the illustrations seem accurate and undoubtedly adequate for identification purposes, though the shapes of some seem a little odd to me. I was, however, particularly impressed by Sophie Webb's night birds, especially her larger owls.

In summary, this is another first-class book from Steve Hilty, which can be highly recommended.

David Fisher

A BIRDER'S GUIDE TO ALASKA

By George C. West. American Birding Association, Colorado Springs, 2002. 586 pages; line-drawings; maps.
ISBN 1-878788-19-1.
Paperback, £21.95.

This guide comes in tough, spiral-bound, A5 format and opens with a 23-page introduction which, in addition to summarising Alaska's special birds, other animals and vegetation, contains useful information on the local inhabitants and their culture, on planning ahead and travel resources, climate

and clothing, as well as precautions and safety.

The real meat in this guide is contained within the 50 individual site chapters, which have been compiled by 40 specialists. Over 80 maps and 65 line-drawings support the detailed descriptions of over 200 of the most accessible and rewarding sites to be found in Alaska and adjacent regions of the Yukon Territory and British Columbia, Canada, which border the Alaska Highway. Each chapter provides a site description, some relevant background history, recommendations on the best season to visit and, of course, the likely species to expect. In addition, information concerning logistics,

access, accommodation, vehicle rental, permits, contacts, etc. is included.

An extensively annotated checklist to the 500 or so species (and subspecies) recorded in Alaska provides a useful and quick reference. The guide concludes with three appendices: a detailed tabular checklist for 25 important sites listing the species likely to be seen in summer, a list of useful organisations, and an 11-page annotated gazetteer and pronunciation guide. Finally, a bibliography and checklist of mammals, reptiles, amphibians and fishes is followed by a species and localities index.

Oscar van Rootselaar

THREATENED BIRDS OF ASIA: THE BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL RED DATA BOOK

Edited by Rudyanto & Neil Aldrin D. Mallari.
CD-ROM version by BirdLife International, Cambridge, 2001. £12.00.

Originally published as a monumental and authoritative two-volume hardback, this CD-ROM version is easy to access, and navigation is straightforward using Adobe Acrobat Reader (provided on the CD). Coverage extends from

Pakistan and Russia, east and south to Indonesia and East Timor, encompassing much of the Eastern Palearctic and Oriental regions: only western Asian countries are omitted. Every threatened species is treated, making this the most

detailed and complete inventory of Asia's endangered birds available.

On the opening page, the Table of Contents leads to the individual species accounts. For most species, these are the most detailed ever published. All run to several pages, with that for Black-faced Spoonbill *Platalea minor* extending to 24 pages. Each account begins with species status and is followed by distribution, which lists all recently published records. At least one map accompanies each account,

with the exact location of each documented record marked with a dot, which is invaluable for those unfamiliar with the many obscure locations. Further sections feature population, ecology, threats, conservation measures taken and proposed, and, finally, various remarks and facts not included elsewhere. A 116-page gazetteer lists all locations mentioned in the text, in country sequence. An interactive list of species recorded by territory enables quick access to each species account, while a section containing over 7,000 references comprises a further 264 pages.

Although aimed primarily at NGOs, researchers and conservationists, this is a gold mine of information and will undoubtedly interest anyone with a concern for Asia's birds. The facts make grim

reading, however. A total of 323 species, 12% of Asia's avifauna, are facing global extinction. Of these, 41 are considered Critically Endangered, their prospect of surviving the next 10 years being estimated at 50% or less, while eight may already be lost. A further 317 species are classified as Near Threatened and 11 as Data Deficient. Cherry-picking species accounts at random provides a fascinating insight into the uncertain future facing some of Asia's most exciting birds. The plight of Gurney's *Pitta pitta gurneyi* is well documented, while recent population declines in Nordmann's Greenshank *Tringa guttifer* and Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Eurynorhynchus pygmeus* are brought into focus. Even seemingly well-protected species face unex-

pected threats. For example, the status of Christmas Island Frigatebird *Fregatta andrewsi* is described as critical, with an 80% population decline anticipated over the next 30 years, due to introduced Yellow Crazy Ants *Anoplolepis gracilipes* preying on nestlings.

Asia's avifauna faces mounting threats ranging from deforestation, land drainage, industrialisation and sprawling urbanisation to pollution and over-hunting. With additional pressure from the burgeoning human population, unsustainable demands on finite land resources can only put further pressure on Asia's birds. Only by acting now can change occur, and this publication represents a significant step forward.

Peter Kennerley

BIRDS OF THE WORLD

By Lars Larsson, Erling Larsson and Göran Ekström. Birds of the World HB, Väse, Sweden, 2002. Two CDs. US\$150.00.

These CDs, which can run on either a Macintosh or Windows operating system, require 1.5 Gb of free disk space and self-printing of the 66-page illustrated manual. Installation is easy and this (primarily taxonomic) database presents 9,970 species (16,500 subspecies), along with separate lists of 112 doubtful and 134 recently extinct species. The main menu has options for literature (a long but sortable list of references), gazetteer (4,595 entries), biography (1,989 entries on etymology and 751 authors), species inquierandae (hybrids, artefacts and new discoveries), recently extinct birds, birds in countries (over 240 country lists), personal checklists, figures (interesting statistics) and photog-

raphers (including a biography and photograph of all 64 photographers along with addresses and lists of species illustrated).

The layout can be switched from List to Base, with variable menus for each mode, all accessed by a single button-stroke or mouse-click. Generally, options are search, sort (five sequences) and combine, from which one can pick continents and select countries. The Base layout links to a wealth of information, e.g. the 14,479 photographs covering 3,872 species (c. 38.8%), 5,118 three-colour maps, subspecies details, taxonomic notes and conservation status, but no sound has been included. Additional data embrace 1,800 breeding tags (e.g. location

and type of nest, clutch size, brood size, and incubation period), longevity (occasionally), distribution (introductions, escapes and 7,400 altitude tags), and subspecies (range, year and synonyms).

The photographs (all by Swedish photographers) vary in quality from rather poor to really excellent. The selection clearly depended on availability; for example, there are 11 pictures of Ibisbill *Ibidorhyncha struthersii*, but only four of the 44 tinamous (Tinamidae). Despite this, the many data gaps and the small errors, inevitable for a first edition of such a work, this program provides an incredible collection of up-to-date facts and photographs in a single package and for a fair price.

Link: www.birdsoftheworld.org

Oscar van Rootselaar

North America has three pipits, all migratory: the endemic Sprague's pipit (*A. spraguei*); the American pipit (*A. rubescens*), which breeds in eastern Siberia, Alaska, northern Canada and south locally to New Mexico, and winters south to Central America; and the red-throated pipit, which breeds in western Alaska. The flight of wagtails and pipits is strong and is often undulating, especially in wagtails. Longclaws normally have a jerky flight, with alternating periods of flaps and glides. Many Palearctic wagtails and pipits migrate to tropical Africa and Asia for the winter. The correndera pipit is unique among South American endemic pipits in having some migratory movements. Feeding ecology and diet. Pipits & Wagtails of Europe, Asia and North America. Per Alström, Krister Mild, Bill Zetterström. English [LANGUAGE].