

REVIEWS

Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic birds. Vol 1, Ratites to Ducks, by Marchant, S., Higgins, P.J., Eds. 1990. Oxford University Press, Melbourne-Oxford. ISBN 0 19 553068 3. 1400 p. Price: \$265.00

Waterfowl

The waterfowl of Australasia have never been reported on in such detail as this. For the past 25 years, Harry Frith's 'Waterfowl in Australia' has been the local waterfowler's bible, equally valuable on both sides of the Tasman. However, when his second edition in 1977 failed to add anything substantive to the 10 year-old first edition, his work dated quickly. Now, thanks to the Handbook, the void has been filled, summarising all that has emerged from recent Australian research and providing, for really the first time, an up-to-date summary on New Zealand species.

The 30 species accounts of resident waterfowl are excellent examples of the synthesiser's art. Probably there is no better example than the text on *Anas eatoni*, the small pintail from Iles Kerguelen and Crozet, to illustrate the effort that has gone into compiling these species accounts. Here is a synthesis which draws heavily from German, French and English-language scientific literature and narrative, producing what I am sure will become the standard international reference for the species. As the list of cited references shows, the process of ferreting out even quite obscure writings, has been done very thoroughly indeed.

It is not just the rarer or more isolated species that have been well reported. The same comprehensive summary is provided for the more common and better known species, like Black Swan, Pacific Black Duck and Grey Teal; the reference lists are extensive, and the level of detail minute. It is here, however, that I have a small grouch! In the pursuit of detail, many species accounts are loaded with previously unpublished results or observations. While this may be a good thing to some readers - at last some of those long-held data are coming to light - there is danger in overdoing it, especially when those data are sourced from a limited number of people. It really *is* important that new results and their interpretation be published in the formal scientific literature so that they run the gauntlet of peer review before becoming enshrined as legend in a book viewed to be so authoritative as the 'Handbook'.

A comment in similar vein could be made about some of the novel taxonomy and vernaculars used. What is the taxonomic authority for the separate species status accorded to our brown-plumaged teals? Why do the common names given for our extinct Merganser, and our sub-Antarctic teal differ from those in the New Zealand checklist? Where is the substantive paper that presents the case for Grey Teal being given the specific name 'gracilis' instead of 'gibberifrons'? Changes of this type need proper citation, if for no other reason than to prevent a personal opinion over-riding convention.

I didn't go hunting through the species accounts searching the detail for a possible error, no doubt there are one or two, but they couldn't possibly detract from the value, the importance and the quality of the narratives.

Together with the 16 quite superb colour plates, these 252 pages of text will be the most quoted and most used accounts of Australasian waterfowl over at least, the next 30 years. Take a bow Rory O'Brien for a job very well done!

M J Williams

Procellariiformes

The species accounts run from pp. 263-735, i.e. cover about $\frac{2}{3}$ of Vol. 1A and deal with 72 species - 70% of those living today. Without checking each separately, the diagnostic features of every species seem well brought out, as are the points of possible confusion with other species. Brief descriptions of plumage are later expanded to feather-by-feather ones with colour chart numbers added where appropriate. In this and other sections the writing is not telegraphic so the accounts tend to be long, even verbose. Measurements from many sources are tabulated and efforts made to separate the data according as the birds were live or skins, by sex, and with means \pm S.D. and nos. in samples. These and similar data will be very useful to many users.

Knowledge of behaviours is well summarised considering the little known when the texts were assembled (only one poor drawing though). Some sonagrams are included, none of sexed birds, and seldom more than one per species, even for those like the 'great' albatrosses that have extensive repertoires.

The nomenclature is conservative. Kerguelen & Tahiti Petrels are still in *Pterodroma*, although the possible use of *Lugensa* and *Pseudobulweria* is mentioned. The compilers were evidently in a quandary about the family name for the storm petrels. They head that section family Hydrobatidae (Oceanitidae) and use the latter for the running head. Thankfully that problem is solved by the recent I.C.Z.N. Opinion 1696 supporting Hydrobatidae. But *Garrodia* has been superseded by *Oceanites* without explanation.

Maps show the ranges independently of seasonal shifts, breeding places and vagrant records being arrowed. The plates are mostly good, not cramped, and the postures look right. Some birds look too 'squeaky clean' for this reviewer, almost stark, e.g. the foreheads of Providence Petrels are shown as snow white not freckled. The prions are all grey on their upper-parts, with hardly a hint of blue even on the bill. The storm petrels have their wings far too pointed (a common fault), the artist evidently not having realised that the outer functional primary is not the longest as it is in other tubenoses. These are nothing like as true to life as in "BWP", for example.

Literature citations are very thorough: even your reviewer read things he'd written but long forgotten! At least one reference is dated 1990 but mostly these run out about 1988 and a few, even from the "Emu", have been overlooked. A good deal of material has been drawn from 'standard' works like "Oceanic Birds of S. America" and "The Handbook of Australian Sea-birds", compare for instance Fig. 1 p. 265 of HANZAB with Fig. 32, p.69 of the sea-birds book.