

REVIEWS

The Fiat Book of Common Birds in New Zealand. Vol. 2. Mountain, bush and shore birds. By Janet Marshall, F. C. Kinsky, and C. J. R. Robertson. Pp. 1-96, pls 1-40. Wellington, &c.: A. H. & A. W. Reed. 1973. \$1.95.

What's in a name? If you are just starting to watch birds, this is hardly the appropriate pocket guide for the common birds of mountain, bush and shore. Of the 49 species described, a mere dozen or so are widely enough distributed to deserve to be called "common" and of these some e.g. Pied Shag, Tui and Bellbird, are scarce or absent over very large areas. Thirteen species breed only in the South Island or further south; and even there, it is the reviewer's experience that a planned campaign, hard work and an element of luck are necessary in the search for Fiordland Penguin, Yellowhead and Rock Wren. Can it truly be said that Kaka, Falcon and Blue Duck are common, when your good keen ornithologist marks it as a red-letter day in his diary if he so much as glimpses any of them?

Of course the text belies the title. Sooner or later the writers' honesty is bound to shine through. Kotuku is described as "in small numbers throughout the country" and Royal Spoonbill as "less common than White Heron." Would it not be stretching the estimates to claim 150 White Heron, and 100 Royal Spoonbills for the whole country? Elsewhere, words such as "restricted," "confined" and the phrase "locally common" appear at suitable moments. That colourful yet self-effacing Australian emigre, the Black-fronted Dotterel, has topped the 500 mark and may be nearing the first thousand. But should it rightly be included? Even if the population of Wrybills is between 5000 and 6000 is it *sensu stricto* a common bird? How many New Zealanders have properly seen one or even have a chance of seeing one? Enough of this. Change the title to "Interesting or Characteristic Birds of N.Z." and grumbling will be muted.

The text is terse and generally sound. Doubtless following the Checklist of 1970, the Maori name of the Pied Shag is mis-spelt and the Little Shag's Maori name ends in a, not u. Perhaps the brilliant emerald green eye of the Little Black Shag deserves mention as a field character. Some purists may find it disconcerting to read under the description of the Banded Dotterel "size similar to Song Thrush." After all, shape and proportions do count for something. Does anyone nowadays ever hear the Brown Creeper called 'Pipipi'? Or has this become a "nomen obsoletum"? Nor is the name Creeper above suspicion. In ornithology it carries with it nuances which conjure up a very different group of passerines. A prize should be offered to some imaginative observer who can coin an acceptable vernacular name for this unique "little brown job." The selection is somewhat uneven. Surely on grounds of distribution and abundance, Knot, Turnstone and even Arctic Skua or Red-breasted Dotterel have a stronger claim for inclusion than some of the favoured ones.

Charles Fleming has written a pithy foreword. Probing beneath the surface and viewing the New Zealand scene through the eyes of a palaeontologist to whom a million years are but as yesterday, he emphasises once again the antiquity and special character of our endemic species. But isn't his phrase "all the birds likely to be seen" unduly pessimistic? If your budding birdwatcher is on the coast, surely much depends upon where he is and when. Between Kaipara Harbour in summer and Otago Peninsula in winter the differences are more obvious than the similarities.

After the promise of the first volume, the illustrations are disappointing. They are boldly statuesque, but hardly inspired, smacking more of the museum specimen and the midnight oil than of the mountain air and the wind off the sea. In too many the essential 'jizz' is quite missing; but they will be helpful to uncritical beginners. If this booklet is a subtle experiment in marketing motorcars, let us have more of them. But its readers must revise their ideas of the common meaning of "common." A final tag is irresistible.

Fiat iustitia, ruat caelum.

R. B. S.



An undescribed extinct fish-eagle from the Chatham Islands, by C. J. O. Harrison & C. A. Walker. *Ibis* 115 (2): 274-277, text-fig. 1, pls 6-7, April 1973.

When Henry Ogg Forbes left New Zealand he took with him a large collection of bird bones which found a home in the British Museum of Natural History. For many years they remained untouched, but Elliot Dawson, working through them in 1961, found bones of an undescribed bird of prey. These (three tarso-metatarsi, two pelves, and a scapula) were considered by Dawson to be of the genus *Haliaeetus*, the Sea Eagles, but no further description was given by him. The present authors have diagnosed the bones as belonging to the related Fish-Eagles, *Ichthyophaga*, "because of the position of the outer proximal foramen."

The new bird is named *Ichthyophaga australis* — this is a welcome change from the *chathamensis* and *chathamica* used as a trivial name for so many of the Chatham Islands birds.

Detailed measurements are given for all the bones, but the scapula is not figured. Throughout the paper, in reference to the tarso-metatarsi, "left" and "right" are transposed*. As Colin Harrison (pers. comm.) comments "It is a pity we could not have left it. A fish-eagle with the feet on backwards would have been more efficient at scooping up prey."

The bird must have been rare when alive, as no examples have yet turned up among the Canterbury Museum collections, including the many thousands collected in the Chatham Island dunes by the reviewer and others during last December and January.

*[But see "Corrigenda" issued with *Ibis* 115 (3), July 1973 — Ed.]

R. J. S.