

REVIEW

A Biology of Birds with particular reference to New Zealand Birds, by Barrie Heather. An Ornithological Society of New Zealand Publication.

Most of us come to bird work when our formal education is finished, and have to pick up our basic theory and information on birds generally in bits and pieces as time permits. Since time is a limiting factor for so many of us, this scrappy method of learning often leaves us totally unaware of the depths of our own ignorance. Barrie Heather's book will help a great deal in this respect, as it briefly but carefully covers a great deal of ground, is also very readable and, considering the lack of index, easy to search via the contents table for that one small fact that you may want.

The whole book is slanted towards the practical study of birds in New Zealand. The author is constantly trying to see our birds against a larger perspective. What are their taxonomic relationships to the whole world of bird species? How do their characteristics fit into the various theories of evolution, dispersal, population dynamics and so on. Up until now we have had no books that specifically place our birds against the background of ornithological theory. It has been a matter of searching scientific journals, often not readily available to the layman. This book admittedly is only a beginning since our knowledge is so fragmentary, and thus it should be read carefully and critically. Be prepared to argue with the author and ask, by letter if necessary, what are supporting facts for a particular statement. Gaps in our factual knowledge are only too evident, but look also for gaps in the logic of the deductions and interpretations. There has been a regrettable lack of theorizing in New Zealand ornithology and I feel sure that this lack of a framework in which to place their facts has hampered many amateurs once they have acquired a sound factual and local knowledge of their birds. I hope that this book will stimulate argument and force people to define what needs to be tackled most urgently in New Zealand ornithology. What are our special problems and what are our particular advantages compared with other countries? I feel that we could profitably compare the generally wide ecological tolerance of our successful bush birds with the high degree of adaptation shown by birds of analagous archipelagos such as the Galapagos. The author discusses the direct historical approach to this situation, but might it not be possible to find other approaches? I. A. E. Atkinson's technique of defining food stations with precision looks interesting in this respect.

I will not give you a resume of the contents of this book as these were listed in the brochure distributed with *Notornis* last year. The most interesting section, as it is the one containing the most problems is "Features of the New Zealand Avifauna" with the section on "Birds and Man in New Zealand" coming close behind.

For the beginner in bird watching I can recommend this book as a companion to the Field Guide; and to those with more experience here is where you can find some initial frameworks in which to place your factual knowledge, and also a means of entry into the main body of ornithological literature.

— JILL HAMEL