

REVIEWS

A Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand, by R. A. Falla, R. B. Sibson and E. G. Turbott. Collins, 1966. \$4.50.

The remarkable growth of organised ornithology in New Zealand in the few decades since O.S.N.Z. was founded has been very largely through the example, guidance and stimulus of these three authors. It is fitting therefore that it should be their voluntary labours with the *Field Guide* that will found a new generation of richly fortunate ornithologists for whom the understanding of the relationships, distribution, status and field identity of New Zealand birds can be the starting point rather than the culminating point of their interest in birds.

The desperate need for a field guide has long been evident, particularly since the appearance of such books in Europe and the U.S.A. has shown the way. However, much greater knowledge has been needed of the species present, their distribution, habitat and breeding before a worth-while attempt could be made. It is therefore a tribute not only to the authority of the authors but also to the swift progress of N.Z. ornithology that the book is so comprehensive.

Undertaken at the request of the O.S.N.Z. Council, the preparation must have been enormous. The result has been worth waiting for. The accumulated experience of N.Z. ornithologists has been painstakingly brought together and condensed into a text as reliable, clear and readable as the best of overseas field guides. There are minor faults, some unevenness inevitably remains from a three-author system, and some features might be improved. These, however, can mostly be done quite readily, now that the main work has been so carefully completed.

Doubtless many users of the book will find points they would wish improved or corrected in light of their own local knowledge. A second edition is already in early incubation so that now is the time to send the Editor constructive, practicable suggestions.

The text takes as its starting point the well-tryed Peterson layout for each species, under headings of description, voice, habitat and range, and (for local breeders) breeding. An exception is the Game Birds which receive a remarkably cursory treatment that will have to be completed in the next edition. The descriptions are clear and succinct, as befits a field guide. Specially valuable field characters are emphasised by italics but this very helpful technique is used with varying liberality in different sections. Some species, e.g. some petrels and gulls, in which italics are desirable, are given none.

Sensibly, the birds are arranged closely in the order of the 1953 *Checklist*, not in order of size or habitat as some books have attempted. This is simpler for both writer and reader, particularly when similar species are to be compared or taxonomic relationships are to be discussed.

In some ways this is as much a fireside book as a field book, for we have often in the sections on habitat and range a condensed but absorbing discussion of a species' history, relationships, behaviour and movements. Also we are treated to an introduction to many bird Orders which explains some features of interest and the place

in the world pattern of the species representing the Order in N.Z. Such introductory material, although strictly beyond the scope of a field guide, is very valuable to the inexpert reader. Here the text is most apparently uneven. While some introductions, e.g. to kiwis, diving petrels, gannets, rails, gulls, are good, some distinctive N.Z. groups e.g. wattle-birds, wrens, N.Z. Thrushes, parrots, receive either no introduction or one that is of little help to most readers.

We have the opposite extreme in a five page flight into the joys and techniques of wader study. Waders are prominent in our avifauna and it is I suppose relevant to give them special attention, even to an emphasis on the rarity, for waders have inspired a high proportion of amateur ornithology in N.Z.

However, I should like to see similar emphasis given to our seabirds, their role in our fauna and in the world pattern, the pleasures, techniques and difficulties in studying them. This would include comments on banding and on beach patrolling, N.Z. activities almost as widespread as wader study.

In fact I should like to see the seabird text extended to include a small sub-section for each species to help the patroller. This would include culmen measurements. For example, neither the text nor the illustrations distinguish the two albatrosses by their nostril shape and, whereas Plates 5, 6 and 7 are splendid for patrollers, the text does not support their use in this way.

The illustrations are for many people the main part of a field guide. Individually they have been beautifully prepared by Miss Talbot Kelly. Very few (notably Takahe) are unconvincing and, if the reproduction of some plates can be improved, the public and the visitor, who are entitled to identify their birds from pictures first, will be quite well served.

Plates 1, 2, 16 and 18 are a delight, although I am not clear whether the pigeon, cuckoo and myna are inserted as afterthoughts or as a size comparison. Incidentally, I presume the birds of each plate are to the same scale? Something very odd has happened to shag beaks in Pl. 8 and what a ghastly mess of blurring and false colouring has occurred in the printing of Pl. 15 and, to a lesser extent, of Pl. 17.

If there had to be a limited allocation of species to plates, the first need of inexperienced readers, I should have expected a less uneven choice of candidates for several plates. Would not the tits, robins and Fantail take precedence over Saddleback, Thrushes and Stitchbird in Pl. 16, for instance, or general views of Banded and Red-breasted Dotterels, Spurwing and Golden Plovers over Terek Sandpiper and Tattler in Pl. 12? In any case, I hope that over future editions the number of plates can gradually be increased until at least all common species can be covered in plates of the same high standard as these.

Well, we have our book now, to which we have all indirectly contributed in some small way. I hope we can all be as pleased to have it as I am, as proud of standards of accuracy and presentation. At last, too, we shall now be spared embarrassment when acquaintances ask what bird book they should have in the house.

— B.D.H.