

Book reviews

Edited by B. GILLIES

The Slater Field Guide to Australian Birds, by Peter Slater, Pat Slater and Raoul Slater, 1986. Dee Why, N.S.W.: Lansdowne-Rigby. Pp 344, col. p11 157, maps. 113 × 215 mm. \$29.95.

Peter Slater, in conjunction with his wife Pat and their son Raoul, has produced a one volume field guide for the whole of Australia which looks like being serious competition for Graham Pizzey's popular field guide.

The great strengths of this book lie in its size and its format. For the first time, here is a field guide which can actually be used in the field. Unlike earlier multi-volume or large format guides, Slater will fit in a trouser or jacket pocket. Gone are the days of carrying guides in day packs or rushing back to the car to confirm an identification. What is remarkable is that it has taken so long for a pocket sized field guide to appear. Our northern hemisphere counterparts have had them for years. The other great strength is the format. At last we have a field guide with the text and distribution maps opposite the illustrations.

While these features alone will assure the success of the volume, it suffers from a number of flaws. Slater has used mostly the RAOU recommended common names, but where 'academic' names are recommended for common names or where changes recommended by the RAOU are 'unnecessary', Slater uses his own favourites. Thus 'warbler' is used for gerygone and 'field wren' is used for hylacola, but cisticola and phalarope, both 'academic names', have been retained. He omits to mention that in at least one case, he has pre-empted Dick Schodde's checklist and lumped the Crimson, Adelaide and Yellow Rosellas together under Blue-Cheeked Rosella. To confuse things further, group names that have been used for subheadings in the text seem to conform the RAOU recommendations, e.g. Gerygones and Fairy Wrens. In specific entries, however, 'warbler' and 'wren' are used.

Each plate has one or two headings in bold type indicating the families to which the birds belong. For example, a plate headed 'Goshawks' shows birds labelled 'brown', 'grey' and 'red'. By using abbreviated labels on illustrations, the book will confuse beginners for years to come with non-existent species such as Australian Hobby Falcon, the Malleefowl Mound-builder, Cockatiel Parrot and the Tree and Fairy Swallows. No space is saved by these abbreviations, and they only make life difficult.

Another disappointment is the use of background colour in the plates. Instead of the crisp white finish of Pizzey, birds are set against a motley bluish fawn backdrop. While the illustrations are of sufficiently high quality to aid identification, like those in the early two-volume Slater, they seem rather stiff, lifeless and schematic. This is caused mainly by the use of solid blocks of

colour; a Flame Robin is a block of red surmounted with a block of grey, with no tonal variation or finer definition of individual feathers.

The distribution maps conform closely to the RAOU Atlas as one would expect. When will someone be brave enough to indicate seasonal variation on distribution maps of Australian birds? If a species is only present in the southern part of its range in the summer, why not show it with a simple system of colours or shadings. An excellent example of this may be found in Henizel, Fitter and Parslow, *The Birds of Britain and Europe*.

Strangely, no distribution maps are given for exotic species. This is a serious omission as the spread of pest species such as the Common Myna and Common Starling are major conservation issues.

The text accompanying each species seems generally accurate but skimpy. This is necessary in view of the physical constraints of the size of the volume. I would have preferred even less description of the birds' appearance and more of the type of very useful information given under Pizzey's 'similar species' heading.

The bottom two centimetres of each plate are taken up with illustrations of the eggs of the birds shown on the page. An odd choice for a field guide; most of us will never see even one tenth of the eggs that are shown. I would have preferred more nests. Some nests are included but only as fillers where there was room on the page.

A number of points of accuracy must be raised. Gerygone is not pronounced 'grig-on-ee' (p. 260), but 'jer-ig-on-ee' with the stress on the second syllable. This is a beautiful name from the Greek meaning 'born of sound'. Secondly, there are three mistakes in the names of people acknowledged on p. 9. Thirdly, I have searched back and forth through the book for the Blackbird; it seems impossible that this species has been overlooked.

I am concerned at the strength of the binding and the resilience of the cover. After six years of hard labour, both covers finally dropped off Pizzey, and now I am missing half of the introduction and half an index. After barely a week in the field, Slater's spine is showing signs of stress and the cover is looking dog-eared.

Slater falls short of the ideal field guide, but the benefits of its size and format far outweigh the deficiencies in the text and illustrations. Until the ideal guide materialises, Slater will be the industry standard.

Ian M. Taylor