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Book review

Edited by D. Jones

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A GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF WALLACEA by B. Coates and K.D. Bishop

1997. Dove Publications, Brisbane. Pp. 536, 64 colour plates, 5 b/w drawing, 1 map, 228 x 150 mm. \$65.00 Hardcover.

Between the Sunda and Sahul shelves lie the 10 000 islands of Wallacea, probably the most complex geological region on earth. These islands, with evocative names like the Celebes and the Spice Islands, have long been a magnet to adventurers and romantics. They have also played an important role in the development of biological theory, for it was here that Alfred Wallace, whose name the region honours, developed his ideas on natural selection and founded the discipline of biogeography.

Yet, for all the excitement the region has aroused in the past it remains one of the least known faunal regions of the world. This was not because the early collectors were lacking in endeavour; hardship was a hallmark of these early voyages in eastern Indonesia: collections (and collectors) were lost when canoes capsized or the tall ships sank on the long trip back to Europe. Often specimens were collected only around the main harbour villages because the garrison was un-

able to protect the explorers further inland. Moreover, there was no consolidation. Specimens were scattered among the museums of Europe and America but very few details of life history made it into the literature.

It is only in the last couple of decades that ornithologists have made much headway in documenting the calls, habits and habitat of this remarkable fauna. And it is a remarkable fauna. An exact third of the 696 species recorded are endemic, which, in terms of endemic species per square kilometre of land, is about four times more rewarding than Madagascar. It contains species clearly derived from two faunal regions, the Indo-malayan to the west and Australasian to the east, as well as species of no obvious affinity. Even within an island there can be a peculiar mix of faunal affinities, plus a couple of endemic genera.

The first systematic review of the Wallacean avifauna is White & Bruce (1986), *The Birds of Wallacea*, that Coates and Bishop acknowledge paved the way for their guide, which is followed closely in taxonomic matters. They include a number of 'subspecies?' to encourage further study but refrain from naming forms without established cause. Instead they have focused on pulling together current knowledge on distribution, status and life history; essentially the wealth of ecological detail that was not available to White & Bruce (1986).

The book starts with 45 pages of introductory text covering topography, vegetation, climate, biogeography and conservation, not much for a region as complex as Wallacea. The essays are necessarily concise and the authors have not indulged in much analysis but there is quite enough to set the scene and with suggestions for further reading a rewarding and appropriate start to the guide.

From such a traditional beginning the authors then take a bold approach to organisation. Issues of identification, including tips, similar species and notes on subspecific variation are dealt with in text opposite the plates. This should work better than it does. Invariably the text spills over onto proximate pages not opposite the plates and the intended elegance of the layout is lost. To some extent the authors are victims of their own detail as it is usually the text required to clarify subspecific variation that causes the problem. This often gets quite complex as an island fauna encourages subspeciation and the layout has to accommodate a myriad of slightly but distinctly differentiated forms.

Generally, species identification has never been a great challenge in Wallacea. Unlike continental faunas, there are no suites of confusingly similar congeners on

a single island. There are exceptions; resident accipiters on Sulawesi, for example, take some getting used to but for the most part it was even possible to make headway with the very short descriptions of endemic species in White & Bruce (1986). Oddly, one of the greatest challenges is between different families: the celebrated friarbird mimicry of orioles. The similarity is not done justice in the plates but is highlighted in the text and the paintings are generally of a high standard.

Following the 64 plates we arrive at the bulk of the book, 300 pages on range, status, habitat, habits and voice. Much of this information is published here for the first time and never has so much ecological detail on Wallacean birds been assembled in one volume.

In the decade between the publication of White & Bruce (1986) and the cut off point for this volume there has been a huge resurgence of interest in Wallacea. Twitchers have been to islands not visited for decades, university expeditions have explored remnant patches of forest that have never been ornithologically surveyed, and museums have restarted collections on islands that were only cursorily collected. Further, just about everyone has carried a tape recorder. The accumulation of distributional information has been huge and although much of it is published in *Kukila*, a lot of it is squirreled away in note books and trip reports. The authors have managed to get hold of much of it and, luckily, are experienced enough in the region to be able to sift out the absurd and make the rest comprehensible.

As niches seem to vary from island to island, each species requires a summary of habitat, altitudinal preference and status specific to each island within its range. This is hugely useful to anyone trying to understand the Wallacean avifauna and works as a statement of where ornithology currently stands in the region.

On the larger islands there is some altitudinal stratification but it seems to break down on islands about the size of Timor. Here, species tend to be commoner at certain altitudes but may occur at any level. For someone schooled in the Indo-malayan fauna the sight of a Little Pied Flycatcher at sealevel is a shock. Although the authors have overlooked this particular example of insular niche release, it is the wealth of ecological detail that takes this volume beyond a field guide.

The authors point out some yawning gaps in our knowledge: migrant passerines, for example, require much more work in Wallacea. Although an archipelago is unlikely to be a major wintering ground for many palaearctic species, recent records suggest that signifi-

cant proportions of some populations probably winter in Wallacea. The identification of these migrants, particularly at the subspecies level, is one of the next challenges. Migrant seabirds and waders have also been largely ignored by collectors and it is the work of itinerant birdwatchers catching inter-island ferries that is starting to fill the gaps.

It seems churlish to be critical of problems to which the reviewer can see no solution but if there is a shortcoming it is that calls are not transcribed consistently. This is a problem which all modern guides grapple with, none entirely satisfactorily. Sonograms might have helped as sometimes different transcriptions look as though they might actually be different interpretations of the same call. Perhaps the inclusion of a tape or discs, as already there are almost two books here, a traditional field guide and a guide to the distribution of birds in Wallacea.

The avowed goal of this book is conservation. The depth of knowledge and obvious passion of the authors

will ensure that everyone owning this book will wish the fauna well, whether they get there to wonder at it themselves or simply read about it. But in the end conservation is a local issue and a local field club probably does more real good than all our fulminating overseas. It is a common observation nowadays but we owe it to conservation that books like this one appear in Indonesian editions and at an affordable price.

The reason this book has been so eagerly awaited has not been for new taxonomic or theoretical interpretations but as an account of the birds. Not only are some species illustrated for the first time but most species now have some depth; we know something of their calls, habitat and behaviour. It might have been a decade in the writing but nothing as comprehensive could have been done much faster, or earlier. We should be grateful that our neighbouring fauna has received such diligent, and inspired, treatment.

Paul Andrew
Bondi, NSW

Publications recently received

Edited by D. Jones

THE BIRDS OF ST HELENA

by B.W. Rowlands, T. Trueman, S.L. Olson,
M.N. McCulloch and R.K. Brooke

1998. *British Ornithologist's Club, Tring, UK*. Pp. 296, 255 x 160 mm. Colour photographic plates 50, coloured maps 2. £22.00 Hardback inc. p&p.

THE FIRST FIVE YEARS*

by Greg Harold and Susanne Dennings

1998. *Malleefowl Preservation Group Inc., Ongerup, WA*. Pp. 97, 295 x 210 mm, Black and white figures 26. No price given.

KEA, BIRD OF PARADOX: EVOLUTION AND BEHAVIOR OF A NEW ZEALAND PARROT*

by Judy Diamond and Alan B. Bond

1999. *University of California Press, Berkeley, USA*. Pp. 243, 217 x 150 mm. Colour plates 1, black and white line drawings 28, 3 maps. US\$29.15 Hardback inc. p&p.

SWALLOW SUMMER*

by Charles R. Brown

1998. *University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, USA*. Pp. 371, 228 x 152 mm. Black and white photographs 26, 1 map. US\$16.95 paperback.

RAILS: A GUIDE TO THE RAILS, CRAKES, GALLINULES AND COOTS OF THE WORLD*

by Barry Taylor

1998. *Pica Press, Mountfield, UK*. Pp. 599, 246 x 175 mm. Colour plates 43, many line drawings, figures and maps. £35.00 Hardback inc. p&p.

JOHN GOULD THE BIRD MAN: CORRESPONDENCE VOLUME 1*

edited and compiled by Gordon C. Sauer

1998. *Maurizio Martino/The Natural History Museum, London; Mansfield Centre, Connecticut, USA*. Pp. 340, 254 x 182 mm. US\$56.00.

* To be reviewed in *Emu*.