

# Book review

Edited by P. Dann

## AVIAN SYSTEMATICS AND TAXONOMY edited by J.F. Monk

1992. *British Ornithologists' Club, London. Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club Volume 112A (Centenary volume)*. Pp. 311, hardback, 223 x 140 mm. £32. Available from the Hon. Treasurer, Hammerkop, Frogmill, Hurley, Maidenhead, Berks SL6 5NL, UK.

Taxonomists. Love them or loathe them, it is difficult to see how ornithologists could work without them, or at least without the classification system they have built up. The *Bulletin of the B.O.C.* has played a fair part in this process over the last century and continues to do so. It has changed, though, since the days when there was much emphasis on eggs and when some articles began with the frightening words 'Mr Gregory M. Mathews sent in the following descriptions of new forms'. It now serves the need for an international journal publishing short papers on taxonomy at species and subspecies level, on aspects of taxonomic history and on a smattering of other taxonomic, distributional and morphological miscellanea. This centennial edition presents 19 papers on varied topics of bird taxonomy.

The book differs from the ordinary bulletins of the B.O.C. in presenting more than the usual number of theoretical and review papers. These include a long review of the history of species concepts by Haffer; a description of the activities of the Standing Committee of Ornithological Nomenclature; and suggested guidelines for the taxonomy of lower categories by Amadon and Short (a paper I often referred to for its definitions of subspecies, superspecies and the like). Lecroy and Vuilleumier give guidelines for the description of new bird species, failing to mention the most important step (first, discover a new species of bird). Walter Bock discusses methodology in avian macrosystematics and presents several case studies, understandably using examples with which he is particularly familiar. This leads to an unfortunate impression that systematics of a group remain murky until Bock steps in to save the day. More to my taste was the paper on 'systematics and micro-evolution' by Peter Grant, whose report on detailed studies of Darwin's Finches highlights the feasibility and potential of really observing evolution in action.

Given the increasing importance of biochemical techniques in modern taxonomy, it is surprising that only two papers deal with these aspects — and one of these is about uropygial lipids, not exactly the substances used most commonly by workers in avian systematics. Barrowclough reviews biochemical tech-

niques used in higher level systematics, concluding that DNA sequencing is the way of the future. Effects of biogeography on variation in birds of southern and central Africa are discussed by Clancey and Louette respectively. There is a brief review of the use of behaviour as a taxonomic aid, and an account of myrmecophagy in African birds (which is not strongly taxonomically oriented). Among the most fascinating contributions is a paper by Knox and Walters about the bird collections held at the British Museum of Natural History. It is surely essential reading to workers using or planning to use the awesome BMNH collection and is of general interest for its comments on curatorial problems. I would like to see papers of this kind about other important bird collections.

Several papers deal more directly with birds. These include a lucid summary by Panov of geographical variation in the 'Eastern Pied Wheatear' complex. Potapov summarises the impressive adaptations of grouse which allow them to use snow burrows as thermal refuges and argues that the grouse should be given full family status. His argument that New World quails should be combined with Old World pheasants, quails and allies in a polyphyletic family Phasianidae is less convincing. Voous expresses similar reservations about defining genera solely on phylogenetic grounds, arguing that a more pragmatic approach is appropriate given that establishing monophyly of a genus is difficult and that the genus is a concept of classification rather than a real entity in nature. A discussion of taxonomic research in West Africa by Morel and Chappius is interesting for its emphasis on voice as a taxonomic character.

The last paper of the book reviews the bird species described from 1981 to 1990, continuing a series of such papers prepared at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) since the 1940s. In keeping with previous papers in the series, it could have been improved by inclusion of suggested English names for the new species. Nevertheless, it is a useful and interesting document, in part because it is not easy to keep track of those new species described in obscure references and in part because the taxonomic status of each new species is discussed and appraised. The summary of this paper is indicative of the critical nature of these discussions — of the 43 'species' considered, 19 were thought to be glorified subspecies or dodgy in some other fashion. Most of the new 'species' have been found in the tropics of Africa and South America but some are from closer to home. These include the *Eungella* Honeyeater, which is approved of as a good

species, and Amsterdam Albatross, Cox's Sandpiper, Campbell's Fairy Wren and Rusty-tailed Gerygone, which are not. Strong words are said about some of these, including rather surprising condemnations of a couple of field guides for their 'premature' inclusion of Amsterdam Albatross and Cox's Sandpiper. Is it really wrong for field guides to treat the identification of little-known birds (whatever their true taxonomic status) which are at times seen in the field? One also wonders when a species can be considered 'good' — when the AMNH says so?

Readers expecting *Avian Systematics and Taxonomy* to live up to its title will not find succinct definitions of 'systematics' or 'taxonomy' in this book; nor will they

find a complete text on these subjects. It is more a collection of diverse papers, mostly by workers who could loosely be described as traditionalists; this is not the reference to consult for arguments in support of (say) the phylogenetic species concept, or of those workers that do not consider collection of a specimen essential in describing a new form. Although this book contains much of interest, is well edited and is reasonably priced for members of the BOC, some miserly and unscrupulous readers may be tempted simply to photocopy those articles they find useful, the book being of a neat size for this purpose.

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### Opinion published in the *Bulletin of Zoological Nomenclature*

The following Opinion was published on 16 December 1993 in Vol. 50 Part 3 of the *Bulletin of Zoological Nomenclature*. Copies of this Opinion can be obtained free of charge from the Executive Secretary, I.C.Z.N., c/o The Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 5BD, U.K.

Opinion 1751. *Procellaria gigantea* Gmelin, [1789] (currently *Macronectes giganteus*; Aves, Procellariiformes): usage of the specific name conserved by the designation of a neotype.