

Book Review

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The Alexander Library holds a comprehensive collection of ornithological literature, including an extensive array of journals and a large collection of grey literature. The library has greatly benefited from its close connection with the British Ornithologists' Union. For many years, all journals received in exchange for the *Ibis* have been deposited at the library, as have most books sent for review through the generosity of reviewers and publishers.

In return, as a service to readers, this review section of *Ibis* is organized and edited by Dr Daniel A. Villar (daniel.villar@biology.ox.ac.uk), with the help of a panel of contributors. We are always grateful for offers of further assistance with reviewing, especially with foreign-language titles.

MENKHORST, P., ROGERS, D., CLARKE, R., DAVIES, J., MARSACK, P. & FRANKLIN, K. (Illus.) **The Australian Bird Guide, Revised Edition**. 566 pages (c. 250 plates with colour illustrations, colour distribution maps), London: Helm (imprint of Bloomsbury), 2024, flexibound £45 (NHBS), ISBN: 9781399421706 (pb)

Australia has been well-supplied with field guides to its birds over the last 40 years or so with at least four good predecessors to this book's first edition that came out in 2017, and here, we have it in a 'revised' edition. There are about 936 species included covering the entire bird fauna of Australia including outlying islands and territories except for Antarctica. This leads us to the problem: It is a bit large and heavy for a field guide. But it is comprehensive, a kind of mini-encyclopaedia of Australian birds, really useful for this non-Australian to get perspective on these birds and their relationship to bird faunas elsewhere.

The illustrations include flight patterns and plumage variations and are first rate. The descriptions are detailed and excellent, and I especially appreciated the 'notes' for each species, several lines on habits, distribution and visibility. After 30 pages of introduction including modern ideas about bird taxonomy and the place of Australian birds, they have, sensibly, not placed the birds in taxonomic order as currently understood: for example the falcons remain next to the hawks and the button quails and plains wanderer next to the quails. True taxonomic order as currently understood is given for all species after the main text. There has been much splitting of species in recent years, and this book is fully up to date. I found almost no differences between this revised

edition and the first from 2017, the only species change being the Imperial Shag now divided into two (adding, in the Latin, the only misprint I have seen). They say that some maps have been updated, but I have yet to find which species. The odd anomaly persists, where subspecies are mapped but there is no mention of these in text or picture, for example Rainbow Lorikeet. The one obvious, and welcoming, change is a far better index. I gather that there is a concise guide by the same author team that may be more portable in the field, but this guide must be the current go-to guide. I suggest just get a big bag when out birdwatching and enjoy the descriptions in a lunch break.

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GORMAN, G. **The Pied Woodpeckers: The Natural History of Europe's Black & White Woodpeckers**. 195 pages (colour photographs, b/w illustrations, colour distribution maps), London: Pelagic Publishing, 2026, paperback £24.99 (NHBS), ISBN: 9781784275969 (pb)

Gorman is a prolific author on woodpeckers. His previous books include monographs on the Black Woodpecker (*Dryocopus martius*), Green Woodpecker (*Picus viridis*) and Wryneck (*Jynx torquilla*), and a photographic guide Woodpeckers of the World covering 279 species.

This volume covers five Eurasian species in a short preface and a chapter on each species. As explained in the preface, the five were chosen because of their similar pied plumages, despite now being classified in three genera, while the also-pied Three-toed Woodpecker

(*Picoides tridactylus*) was excluded purely due to its deficiency of digits and its association with coniferous forests.

Each chapter comprises the same sections: Taxonomy; Description (by sex and age, subspecies, hybrids); Communication (songs, drumming, wingbeats); Distribution, population and trends; Habitats; Food and foraging; Behaviour; Breeding; Relationships (inter-species and with predators and people). There are 11 pages of references.

This highly structured approach facilitates finding particulars of each species but leads to duplication and obscures comparisons. For example, each of the *Dendrocopos* species contains a paraphrase of 'Drumming rather than calls is used to declare and defend territory and to attract mates'. By contrast, Lesser Spotted (*Dryobates minor*) has a 'surprisingly loud' song and 'relatively weak' drumming. Middle Spotted (*Dendrocopos medius*) 'drums, although infrequently and so quietly that it is easily overlooked' and both sexes 'produce a distinctive, diagnostic song'.

Some of the material could have been better presented in tables cutting across the sections, such as the taxonomy, plumage differences and distributions of subspecies. The book is lavishly illustrated with photographs demonstrating some variations in plumage that frustrate a tick-box approach to identification. Two examples fall exactly opposite text stating the opposite: Figure 1.7 shows a Middle Spotted with a strong malar stripe reaching the bill, and Figure 5.2 shows an adult male White-backed (*Dendrocopos leucotos*) of the subspecies *lilfordi* that has a barred rather than white back. (Under taxonomy, it is mentioned that some authors 'consider *lilfordi* to be a species'.)

My motive to review this book was interest in how the species separate ecologically: how is the Syrian (*Dendrocopos syriacus*) able to thrive in towns and nest in trees on busy streets while, on a group visit to a White-backed nest, we were instructed to keep back some 50 m? Some answers are found in the text. Syrian 'avoids forests with a closed canopy', 'is highly synanthropic' and 'can occur in some decidedly sparsely wooded landscapes, a trait that distinguishes it from all other pied woodpeckers in Europe'. White-backed 'is a demanding habitat specialist that ideally needs large areas of mature, unmanaged deciduous forest'. Species (and sexes) may also separate in choice of food, foraging techniques and demands for nest-sites. The information is there, but it is left to the reader to extract and compare. Adding a discussion chapter would round out the book.

The production is excellent, and I found just one misprint: Syrian expanded into Europe at the end of the 19th, not 20th century (p. 84). Feather plates are included for some species and would have benefited from adding a scale.

In summary, this is an authoritative compilation of information on the five species based on the author's fieldwork and extensive (but not exhaustive) literature. Gorman makes a passionate case for woodpeckers as ecosystem engineers, keystone and indicator species. Unfortunately, the growth in scale of forest fires in recent years may blunt the public's acquiescence to leave dead snags, logs and brash in the wild wood.

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EDWARDS, S.V. & REED, M.J. (Eds) **New Perspectives in Ornithology: 21st Century Dispatches Across the World of Birds**. 576 pages, with many illustrations, New York: Oxford University Press, 2026, hardback £29.99, ISBN: 9780197787670 (hb).

Complaints about the over specialization of scientific endeavours go back well over a century. As early as the 1870s, the naturalist William Healey Dall, in correspondence with his friend Alexander Agassiz, wrote that the new generation of scientists coming up in the world were not true naturalists, but had specialisms so narrow that they could not appreciate the broader beauty of nature. If these naturalists thought that the scientists of that age were too specialized, one can only imagine what they would make of the scientists of today, where many of us spend lifespans on minute areas of knowledge. So torrential is the ever-expanding number of papers and journals that it is physically impossible for any one scientist to keep up with even all the new knowledge in their own specific sub-field, let alone what is going on generally in biology. Hence, the usefulness of compendiums such as this one, which offer sweeping reviews of advances across the breadth of ornithology.

This book is a self-conscious spiritual successor to the 1983 *Perspective in Ornithology*, itself a compendium of essays published at the 100th anniversary of the American Ornithologists' Union. The volume begins explaining both why such a volume is needed 43 years after the original *Perspectives*, citing the explosion of both papers and methodologies in ornithology since its predecessor, and how it differs from its predecessor. The book's author list reflects the growing diversity of who practices ornithology, including more women, scholars in the global south and people of colour than the 1983 *Perspectives*. It also covers topics which the 1983 *Perspectives* could not cover, including advances in avian genetics and aspects of avian biodiversity conservation, which were not yet highly pertinent over four decades ago, such as the impact of climate change on birds.

The book is split into five sections: Ecology, Evolution, Behaviour [sic], Databases and Citizen Science, and Conservation and Management. The plethora of authors means that there are multiple perspectives taken

on what should constitute a chapter in this volume. Some, like the authors of Chapter 24, which is focussed on tropically adapted chickens in sub-Saharan Africa, effectively wrote a research paper on a specific topic. However, the majority act as chapter long reviews of the state of their specific part of ornithology. There could be a temptation for a busy working ornithologist to jump to those sections that are most pertinent to his researches, and skip over those that are not. I confess this is how I have used this volume since my first initial read-through. However, I highly recommend reading it through at least once, both to learn what other parts of ornithology are doing and to see what common threads exist, which you might not have otherwise supposed existed. Scholars who focus on other species, or who only study birds as a way to get at interesting evolutionary or ecological questions, rather than for their own sake, will, I think, also find this book valuable. Birds are among the most studied taxa in the world, and questions first posed in birds often come to become important in studies of other taxa. While no doubt its primary audience is ornithologists, a non-ornithological, but biological, reader would glean more knowledge both of the natural world and of the direction of biology in the coming decades from this book.

Each chapter was written independently of each other, and thus necessarily, the book can feel a bit disjointed at times. This is not a shortcoming of the book; it is merely its nature as a collection of essays. However, that makes those themes, which do present themselves serendipitously, all the more interesting, as it suggests that several ornithologists are arriving at them independently. One of the strongest is the need for more basic field research of birds in the wild. This is most elegantly said by David Toews and Elizabeth S. C. Scordato in their chapter on speciation and adaptation, where they say 'technology is not a silver bullet destined to replace the hard, muddy work of natural history. We cannot imagine a world where boots and binoculars are entirely supplanted by molecular labs and remote tracking' (p. 182). The paeans for natural history and fieldwork as not just part of the romantic past of ornithology, but integral parts of its most cutting-edge future research, continue in other chapters, such as on page 324, in a chapter on avian coloration, in which Mary Caswell Stoddard writes 'we must study avian color [sic] vision in the wild, where birds grapple with real-world challenges of finding foods and mates in complex environments', and on page 234, in which C. Jonathan Schmitt says 'a major challenge facing natural history collections in the 21st century will be collecting enough new specimens'. This greater fieldwork is especially needed in the tropics, which harbour most of the world's birds yet remain reservoirs of ornithological ignorance compared to the better studied temperate zone. Even such a basic trait as whether birdsong is primarily a male trait could

be a product of a lack of basic fieldwork in the tropics, as Elizabeth P. Derryberry and Rindy C. Anderson write in their chapter on birdsong on pages 290 about female birdsong, 'Given that most folks who study birdsong have lived and worked in North America and Europe (thankfully this is changing), where male song is more prevalent than female song, it is perhaps not surprising that song is traditionally considered a male trait'.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in ornithology, or biology generally. It is a timely synthesis of the existing literature across ornithology, although I believe that scholars working in other disciplines will find it useful to read as well. I know I will be repeatedly referring to this book in the future, as I try to leave my narrow research specialism and remind myself of the broader picture of ornithological research. I can only hope to be around to read (and perhaps even contribute to) the *Newer Perspectives* 40 plus years hence.

REFERENCE

Brush, A.H. (ed) 1983. *Perspectives in Ornithology: Essays Presented for the Centennial of the American Ornithologists' Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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PASQUIER, R.F. & LA FARGE, M. (Illus.) **Birds at Rest: The Behavior and Ecology of Avian Sleep.** 360 pages (numerous b/w illustrations), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025, hardback £30 (NHBS), ISBN: 9780691259963 (hb)

There is plenty to read about birds. Popular writing, scientific literature and natural history programmes abound on these feathered dinosaurs. Yet, the focus is commonly on remarkable and dynamic waking behaviours, such as the spectacular courtship displays of birds-of-paradise, the ritualistic movements of Manakins or the unusual dancing of Lyrebirds. Other birds, including Eurasian Jays, Kea and New Caledonian Crows, are well studied for their inquisitiveness, planning, problem-solving skills and use of tools. Bar-tailed Godwits and Arctic Terns undertake Olympian migratory feats, travelling thousands of kilometres, often without alighting on land or sea *en route*. These and other features of avian biology make birds inherently interesting and awe-inspiring.

An often-overlooked aspect of the lives of birds, and indeed of most animals, relates to roosting, resting and sleeping. Although the need for sleep is widespread across the animal kingdom, birds have impressive adaptations that allow sleep to proceed in the most unlikely ways and places. This quieter half of avian biology has largely escaped comprehensive synthesis, with the

notable exceptions of Alexander Skutch's *Birds Asleep* (written for adults) and Mo Willems' *Don't Let the Pigeon Stay Up Late!* (intended for children). Relatively little attention has been devoted to sleep by authors, natural historians, zoologists, comparative physiologists and neuroscientists. Roger Pasquier's *Birds at Rest* steps into this space, presenting a modern, multidisciplinary synthesis of how, where and when birds sleep.

Pasquier, an associate in the Department of Ornithology at the American Museum of Natural History and author of *Birds in Winter: Surviving the Most Challenging Season* (2019), brings a seasoned perspective to *Birds at Rest*. He effectively bridges field observations with laboratory-based research, combining the strengths of natural history and behavioural ecology in an approachable and engaging manner. The book is further enhanced by the line drawings of Margaret La Farge, whose work strikingly captures sleeping sandpipers, the upside-down posture adopted by Blue-crowned Hanging Parrots and much else. Given La Farge's evocative watercolour paintings elsewhere, one cannot help but wonder about the visual impact that colour illustrations might have brought to *Birds at Rest*.

The book is thoughtfully organized, moving from a non-technical introduction to why birds sleep to detailed accounts of how and where they sleep. Reflecting his conservationist proclivities, Pasquier concludes the volume with a discussion of the many ways in which human activities affect rest and sleep in birds. To give a flavour of the topics considered, Pasquier introduces the two types of sleep shared by birds and mammals: slow-wave sleep (SWS) and rapid-eye-movement (REM) sleep. Whereas mammals often consolidate sleep into one or a few bouts, birds routinely sleep in episodes lasting seconds or a few minutes. Fascinating research on the phenomenon of unihemispheric SWS is reviewed, including how and why some birds employ half-brained sleep while keeping one eye open to monitor immediate threats. Pasquier covers birds sleeping in diverse biomes, such as Chinstrap Penguins in Antarctica, which can have upwards of 10 000 sleep bouts per day, most lasting less time than it takes to read this sentence. He also discusses equatorial Great Frigatebirds, the only known birds capable of sleeping on the wing during their long transoceanic flights. Pasquier successfully decodes electrophysiological data, turning abstract concepts into an accessible ecological narrative.

Much of the volume is devoted to exploring the ecology of roosting and resting. Choices about where and when to sleep are governed by thermoregulatory demands, foraging opportunities and predator avoidance. In sub-zero environments, for example, small passerines rely on communal huddling or cavity roosting, whereas other birds, such as Capercaillies, exploit the thermal benefits of roosting in snow to minimize heat loss. Birds roosting in warmer climates face different pressures,

such as nocturnal predators, prompting them to carefully select roost sites that maximize safety. Pasquier delves into the merits of social sleeping, for example, Red-billed Queleas and European Starlings, considering the potential benefits of information transfer related to foraging success and the dilution effect associated with safety in numbers. Yet, communal roosting also carries costs for individuals, including increased visibility to predators and greater transmission of parasites.

The final chapter turns explicitly to conservation biology, addressing how modern human activities disrupt the nocturnal landscape. Pasquier builds a data-driven case around the myriad ways in which human activity can affect sleep in birds, from light and noise pollution and hunting pressure to climate change. Crucially, he provides actionable, systemic policy solutions rather than merely cataloguing crises. These include advocating for dark-sky initiatives, noise-abatement corridors and international protection for historically important communal roosts.

Birds at Rest is lucidly written for the non-expert and is an important read for anyone interested in birds, circadian rhythms, behavioural ecology and sleep. For the international readership of *Ibis*, this volume provides a vital reminder that to truly understand the ecology of birds, we must look more closely at what they do during a sizeable, yet often overlooked, portion of their lives.

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BRUSATTE, S. **The Story of Birds: An Evolutionary History of the Dinosaurs That Live Among Us.** 437 pages (b/w photographs and illustrations), London: Picador (imprint of Pan Macmillan), 2026, hardback £19.99 (NHBS), ISBN: 9781035032518 (hb)

It is a rare pleasure to read the work of a popular science writer at the height of their powers, when they are in full confidence of their ability to communicate scientific topics to the public, and before any conceit that can all too often (though not inevitably) cloud the judgements of those who become successful with their pen in the public eye. Richard Dawkins' *Climbing Mount Improbable* (Dawkins 1996), Lewis Thomas' *The Lives of a Cell* (Thomas 1974), David Lack's *Swifts in a Tower* (Lack 1956) and Stephen Jay Gould's *Wonderful Life* (Gould 1989) are all examples of such works – books destined to shape their disciplines by inspiring interest both from adults and from generations of budding scientists reading the popular literature as a way to begin their intellectual journeys. To this august list is added this excellent volume, which I trust will be read for decades to come, and which I hope will inspire the generation of ornithologists still in school and undergraduate education to view ornithology *sensu lato* to fully