

REVIEWS

The Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand. By B.D. Heather & H.A. Robertson. Illustrated by D. Onley. Penguin/Viking, Auckland. 432 pp. ISBN 0-670-86911-2 (hardback) \$49.95

At long last New Zealand has a bird-watcher's field guide in the style of Roger Tory Peterson - this one is modelled on Simpson and Day's "Field Guide to the Birds of Australia". New Zealand bird-watchers now have a guide which includes a bird picture, its description and a small distribution map all together in one place - and how welcome this layout is.

The new field guide, by Barrie Heather and Hugh Robertson, two well-known New Zealand ornithologists, is a compulsory purchase for anyone interested in birds or bird books. It illustrates, describes and discusses all the birds which have been recorded in New Zealand since 1900, and this includes some now-extinct species.

There are 74 plates with a simple but adequate text on the opposite page. After the plates come another 250 pages of discussion and extra notes about each species covering distribution, population numbers, conservation, breeding, behaviour and feeding habits. This is all excellent reference material and makes the book very suitable for beginners and old hands alike.

The plates by Derek Onley accurately depict the birds. The page layout is uncluttered and nicely designed. There is no crowding of the birds on to the page, so the birds are easy to find. The placement of birds alongside other family members is such that there is good comparison and no confusion. Little Tern, for example, is nicely spaced beside the Fairy Tern as is the Yellow-crowned Parakeet alongside the Red-crowned Parakeet, and the Crimson Rosella alongside the Eastern Rosella. Similarly, the placement of the female House Sparrow with the finches, and the Skylark beside the Pipit is excellent for comparison. Such is the standard of the layout.

Here and there the occasional bird lacks a bit of life. The Whitehead, Yellowhead, Fantail, Kokako and Tui appear to me to be in this category, and some of the passerines appear overly plumpish. Also, a hint of blue in the background of some of the seabirds plates might have lightened them up and brought out better their beauty. These, though, are only minor criticisms and I cannot praise enough a great artistic effort.

In the text, some family groupings have sensibly been tidied up, with, for example, the Whitehead, Yellowhead and Brown Creeper now being placed in the whistler family (Pachycephalidae), while the robins and tomtits have been moved into the Australasian robin family (Eopsaltridae). Unfortunately, the authors did not go one step further - I miss the presentation of the relationships of New Zealand bird families with other world bird families.

Most queries, though, are answered and it is hard to fault this book. The text contains all the information the average user will ever need and as one who has already dipped into it many times I am aware it has answered most of my questions. Only occasionally has this not been the case - do both male and female Moreporks, for example, say "more-pork"?

I do miss, thought, not having the family names on each plate. I also miss text layout which quickly accesses the point about the bird you need to know in a hurry. The use of more bolding to highlight some of the descriptive points of each bird opposite the plates would have satisfied this need. And for those who are colour blind, more colour details in the text beside each bird would have been helpful.

The twitching fraternity has already made mention to me of the fact that the book has no systematic index of both common and scientific bird names at the back and no separate list of endemic species. Other twitcher complaints suggest that the vast compendium of knowledge at the back of the book is unnecessary. I personally do not agree with this and find the knowledge at the back of the book of immense value, but I am only a modest lister who prefers to know all about the bird and not just its colour. I do, though, agree with their suggestion that a vinyl cover would be a good improvement in future editions.

The proof that this is an excellent book is that I can't resist delving into it, as do my visitors. It has become a "coffee table" addition to my library. The authors and artist are therefore to be commended. This book should recruit many people to bird-watching as well as assisting the increasing number of overseas twitchers and listers who are discovering New Zealand for its birds.

Like all guides, there is no easy layout to help the raw recruit. However, by constantly thumbing through the plates, this book will quickly help people with their learning and discovery and it will bring greater numbers to bird-watching nationwide. It is a lasting memorial to the late Barrie Heather and a tribute to the knowledge and ability of Hugh Robertson. The work of artist Derek Onley will stand the test of time.

Stuart Chambers



Skuas and jaegers. A guide to the skuas and jaegers of the world. By Olsen, L.M., Larsson, H. 1997. Pica Press, East Sussex. 190 pp. ISBN 1-873403-46-1 (hardback) £24.00

Birdwatchers the world over know that identifying the different skuas and jaegers is no simple task. Identifying a bird as a skua is usually readily achieved, but which one is it? This is surprisingly difficult for a group with fewer than 10 species, but recognition is only part of the problem. The real difficulty is that there is no certainty