

## Review

### Schodde, R.; Mason, I.J. 1999. *The directory of Australian birds. Passerines.*

CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood, Victoria, Australia. ISBN 0-643-06456-7.  
pp. 851. Hardback, 300 x 215 x 50 mm. \$A180.

From its name I expected this book to be a slim paperback, and was somewhat astounded by its size, scope, and detail. It covers just the Australian passerine birds, but it weighs 3 kg and is about the same size as the Australian atlas (Blakers, M. *et al.* 1984. *The Atlas of Australian Birds*. Melbourne University Press).

What is a "directory"? It seems to be a blend of checklist and atlas. According to the title page it's a "taxonomic and zoogeographic atlas of ... biodiversity". All the Australian passerines are covered in systematic order, with short, succinct taxonomic descriptions emphasising diagnostic features, especially colour. But it isn't quite a checklist—for example, there are no synonymies (lists of former names). Large, standardised distribution maps are given, at the same scale as those in the atlas. But it's not quite an atlas because the distributions are generalised and you can't read off individual grid squares.

There are some introductory chapters, and a large glossary at the end, but the bulk of the book is devoted to the species and subspecies accounts with their maps. Each family begins with a short essay on relationships and a line drawing of a relevant (but un-named) species. The printing throughout is in 2 colours, black and blue, with various shades of blue employed to highlight the species and subspecies headings. On the maps, blue and grey shading and hatching depict the complementary distributions of the various subspecies (of each species), including zones of intergradation and regions of uncertainty. The result is pleasing to the eye, and easy to follow.

This volume is unusual and important because it focuses on the 726 *subspecies* of Australian passerines, unlike most other contemporary Australian books that treat the 342 passerine *species* as the fundamental units. The authors argue that the

genetically distinct regional populations of Australian birds need attention because they are the building blocks of evolution and the basic units of biodiversity. One of the book's rationales is conservation—the fear that to work on conserving species is to overlook, and possibly lose, the genetic diversity represented by subspecies.

In this volume they are called "ultrataxa", rather than "subspecies", because the latter "are viewed pejoratively". Renaming things, in the naïve hope that they will work better under new names, is almost a characteristic of the 1990s—during the decade we made it an art-form in New Zealand, with the gratuitous renaming of practically every government and civic agency. The problems still remain, and such is the case with "ultrataxa".

A semipopular book is an unorthodox vehicle for the description of new taxa, but 46 new subspecies are described in the text, as well as four subgenera and two subfamilies. An unfortunate decision was made to name one of the new subspecies "*flavotinctus*" when it belongs to *Oriolus flavocinctus*, a difference in spelling of one letter. This appears to be against the recommendations of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (1985) on the formation of zoological names (Appendix D, I.5).

A major criticism of the new subspecies, and indeed of the characterisations of all the subspecies, is that detailed measurements and statistical tests of size differences are dispensed with, because preparing them was "complex, space-expensive and time-consuming". On the other hand, Schodde and Mason have done a superb qualitative job in portraying the diversity of the regional forms of Australian passerines. In my view the value of the book as a bold and detailed declaration on the subspecific taxonomy of Australian passerines, outweighs its imperfections.

The authors are quick to point out that much more work is needed to confirm and define the subspecies, their distributions, and dynamics at points of contact. I tend to agree with the decision to publish their incomplete account now as a basis for further studies, rather than delaying decades in an endless wait for taxonomic perfection.

There are a few taxonomic implications for New Zealand passerines.

(1) The grey fantail of Australia, Norfolk Island, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, and the southern Solomon Islands is referred to *Rhipidura albiscapa* Gould, 1840. The New Zealand fantail *R. fuliginosa* becomes a species endemic to New Zealand, except that the extinct Lord Howe Island population is also placed in this species.

(2) The extinct gerygones of Norfolk and Lord Howe Islands are recombined with the grey war-

bler *Gerygone igata*, meaning that the latter loses its status as a mainland New Zealand endemic.

(3) Australian pipits are placed in *Anthus australis* Vieillot, 1818, distinct from Afro-Asian forms. Thus *A. novaeseelandiae* becomes a species endemic to New Zealand.

The book has rather more typographical errors than one would wish (including "OSZN" instead of "OSNZ" in several places). My copy had some printing flaws: on p. 667 part of the blue heading type is missing and the map does not seem to show any range. On p. 696 the black type has a shadow.

It is sobering to contemplate the effort that has gone into this monumental book, a work that is truly a milestone on the path to a greater understanding of Australasian birds.

B.J. GILL  
Auckland Museum