

Review

Doughty, C.; Day, N.; Plant, A. 2001. *Birds of the Solomons, Vanuatu and New Caledonia*.

Christopher Helm, London. ISBN 0-7136-4690-X.
pp. 208. Paperback, A5, 91 colour plates, 314 maps.

This is the first field guide to cover this little-known region since Mayr's *Birds of the SW Pacific* (1945). Bregulla's *Birds of Vanuatu* (1992) is useful but not as a field guide. The 2 editions of Hannecart & Letocart's *Oiseaux de Nouvelle Calédonie et des Loyautés* (1980, 1983) have a good selection of photographs. Hadden's *Birds of the North Solomons* (1981) described about half of the Solomon Island birds. Consequently, this new field guide with over 60 species illustrated for the first time is essential for birders visiting this region. In the introduction, the authors say "this is without doubt one of the least known regions of the earth ornithologically." This is true, as new species and subspecies are still being discovered there. Armed with this field guide, visitors will have an excellent opportunity to add to the little that is known about most of the species inhabiting this region. There are 91 colour plates with the text and distribution maps (where applicable) are opposite the illustrations. All 362 species – which include 117 endemics – are covered as well as at least 7 species not yet recorded in the region but which the author believes may turn up the future.

Having lived on Bougainville Island for 7 years, I have chosen to comment on the treatment of those species with which I am most familiar. It seemed to me that if the Bougainville birds were described accurately, then information from the other regions would also be reliable. Unfortunately though, there are many errors and omissions. Unfortunately, the distribution maps cannot be relied on. For example, the white-eyed duck (*Aythya australis*), buff-banded rail (*Gallirallus philippensis*), and spotless crane (*Porzana tabuensis*) are all shown as present on Bougainville but none of these species has been recorded there. Conversely, the Solomon sea eagle (*Haliaeetus sanfordi*) map omits it for Bougainville, where it is a breeding resident.

The "status" of some species is similarly inaccurate for Bougainville. For instance, the little grebe

(*Tachybaptus novaehollandiae*) is said to be "now very rare ...", but it is common and breeds in suitable habitat. The glossy swiftlet (*Collocalia esculenta*) is said to be "by far the commonest swiftlet.": it may be elsewhere, but not on Bougainville. Blyth's hornbill (*Aceros plicatus*) is "uncommon resident throughout the Solomons.", but on Bougainville it is very common. The island-imperial pigeon (*Ducula pistrinaria*) is described as "not particularly common", but, again, on Bougainville it is very common. I acknowledge that it is difficult to be precise when you are covering so many islands over such a wide area, but visitors should not take the "status" comments in this book as gospel for the particular island they are on.

On the whole, calls are poorly described. The Solomon cuckoo-shrike's (*Coracina holopolia*) call is given as a short, rasping *shree*. However, the most distinctive call commonly heard is a clear far-carrying *keweeo*. Birders must become familiar with the call if this endemic species is to be located. The Bougainville monarch (*Monarcha erythrostickus*) has a common call – a series of mournful, slow, clear notes, sometimes all on the same pitch, sometimes downslurred – that is distinctive and easily recognised, but this is not mentioned. Birds such as the ultramarine kingfisher (*Todirhamphus leucopygius*), claret-breasted fruit-dove (*Ptilinopus viridis*), steel-blue flycatcher (*Myiagra ferrocyanea*), and red-knobbed imperial-pigeon (*Ducula rubricera*) have distinctive calls that are not described in this guide.

Errors in the colour plates include the lack of a yellow cere on the imitator sparrowhawk (*Accipiter imitator*) and the eye and cere of the pied goshawk (*Accipiter albogularis*) have not printed nearly as bright as they appear in the field. The male of the Melanesian cuckooshrike (*Coracina caledonica*) has a black bib onto the upper breast which is quite distinctive despite the bird itself being very dark: the female lacks the bib. The painting does not indicate whether it is illustrating the male or female,

but that is perhaps because the text says the sexes are alike, which is not so on Bougainville. The painting of the Solomon sea eagle in flight omits the wedge-shaped tail. In fact the tail has such a pronounced wedge shape that at times it almost looks diamond-shaped. The male and female ultramarine kingfishers are mislabelled on the plate opposite p. 134. A couple of spelling mistakes have slipped past the proof reader: Bougainville is misspelled under the little grebe entry, and Choiseul under the yellow-throated white-eye (*Zosterops metcalfei*) entry.

Finally I would have liked to have seen bird lists for each of the main islands. Even lists of the land

birds and the sedentary shore birds would have been useful. Visiting birdwatchers would then know if they had seen a new species for a particular island. Scientists studying speciation in this area need this information.

As there are several errors from just one island I can only assume the rest of the book is similarly afflicted. Nevertheless, nothing else is available and, if used with caution, it will be a real asset to birders in this region.

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