

REVIEWS

The new guide to the birds of New Zealand, by R. A. Falla, R. B. Sibson & E. G. Turbott. 1979. Pp. 247, 48 col. plates, many b/w ills. Collins. \$13.95.

The "Field Guide" continues to improve with each revision. In the latest (3rd) edition, the text has been reset (though by no means completely revised), and a new set of colour plates has been provided, covering nearly all the species. To say that the plates are an improvement is not to make an artistic judgment, but rather that the style is better suited to a field guide. I found it irritating, however, that the birds on individual plates are often not to the same scale; the inclusion of overall length in centimetres is not an adequate substitute. Another criticism is that species which need to be compared (and are usually compared in the text) are frequently illustrated on different plates. Whether this was the decision of the publisher or the artist I am unable to say. While the sequence of orders and families follows current systematic practice, the same cannot be said of the sequence of species within families. The sequence of species within the Charadriidae, for instance, is decidedly idiosyncratic, and does not even have the merit of grouping species which are easily confused in the field. Neither the above criticisms, nor those which follow should deter anyone from buying this book. In these days of inflation, the retail price of \$13.95 is very good value indeed.

The text, as one would expect, is remarkably free from inaccuracies, but it suffers occasionally from inadequate treatment. The artist has portrayed very few of the species inaccurately, or misleadingly, but the omission of juvenile or non-breeding plumages in certain cases is a pity. Most of the deficiencies in treatment relate to species which will rarely be seen by the great majority, but it is when such species *are* seen that a good field guide is most needed.

Grebes: This group is inadequately dealt with, though reasonably accurately as far as it goes. The text incorrectly continues to state that the Crested Grebe has a distinct winter plumage. It is now known that Australian populations do not. Neither text nor illustrations mention the juvenile plumage of the Dabchick or the winter plumages of Hoary-headed or Australian Little Grebes, quite a serious omission.

Hérons & Egrets: Both text and illustrations describe the wrong subspecies of Cattle Egret so far as breeding dress is concerned; in the race *coromandus* the whole head and neck are suffused with orange-buff. (Homer would also appear to have nodded — for once — in using the feminine form *coromanda*!) The identification of the Plumed Egret may also be rather more difficult than implied by the text. The relatively shorter neck makes the overall length markedly shorter than that of the White Heron, but the difference in body size between a small *alba* and a large *intermedia* is less conspicuous.

Rails: Most recent authorities treat the Black-tailed Native Hen as a moorhen (*Gallinula*). This species is one of the least accurately

portrayed of all those illustrated. Undoubtedly the artist had not seen the species in the field, but there are surely good photographs available. The 'bantam-like' appearance (mentioned in the text) is caused mainly by the long and broad tail, carried above the back constantly, and the long and rather pointed wings project beyond the vent.

Cuckoos: The Fan-tailed Cuckoo appears to have been based on a juvenile specimen or illustration. The colours are correct for an adult except for the tail, which should be darker and with the centre feathers longer. The shorter square tail is also a field character of the Brush Cuckoo (*C. variolosus*).

Swifts: The wings of a flying swift should surely look curved and sickle-like, rather than angled at the carpal joint. As shown, they look too much like swallows with longer wings.

Passerines: The Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike should show at least the head of a juvenile; most of the New Zealand occurrences of this species have been juveniles. The colour on the breast of the female Satin Flycatcher is too dark and extends too far on the breast; separation of this species from the Leaden Flycatcher in the field is not easy. The illustration of a female Goldfinch is apparently based on an aberrant specimen and should be ignored. The Rook appears to have too small a bill, the white on the throat is surely too extensive and intense, and the thighs are insufficiently "shaggy."

Of the fourteen species featured in the above comments, seven are most unlikely to be seen by more than a fortunate few. Of the remaining seven, only the Rook can be said to be poorly portrayed, while the three smaller grebe species will undoubtedly cause trouble when seen out of breeding plumage. All in all, a very fine production on which both authors and artist must be congratulated.

D. H. BRATHWAITE

Seabirds: In this latest edition of the "Field Guide" the text has been reset and almost every bird illustrated. The plates are new and generally superior to the old ones, the "jizz," proportions and stances mostly well caught. These plates and the black and white diagrams should be a big help in field identification.

The following comments are restricted to the substantial part of the work covering seabirds.

The revision of the text seems rather uneven, being strongest in bringing the distributions up to date, with some comments as late as 1977, and including new birds like the Christmas Island Shearwater and the Taiko. Otherwise, the text is often quite out-dated, and at times identical with that of the 1966 edition, even for species on which more work has been published in the last ten than in the previous hundred years!

The nomenclature is also often dated. The Cape Pigeon, of course, remains *Daption capensis*, the two giant petrels, *Macronectes halli* and *giganteus*, are still regarded as subspecies (although it is noted

that both breed on the same island!), and yet the three *cauta* mollymawks remain as full species. Stranger still is the retention of *atratus* for the Erect-crested Penguin, despite the written support in Bull. zool. Nomenclature in 1974 by the late Sir Robert Falla of a proposal to suppress *atratus* and to use *sclateri*, a proposal adopted officially by ICZN back in 1975.

Neither of these criticisms will lead to misidentifications as such, but if a *new guide* is to have any text, then this too ought surely to be new and reflect current practice.

It seems a pity that Chloe Talbot Kelly's plate of penguin heads was discarded, for she got some of the characters just right, whereas in Elaine Power's plate 3 the birds are all grey-backed, their eyes and bills all coloured alike (they aren't), the Erect-crested Penguin lacking the velvety jet-black of head and nape so typical of the species and excellently shown by Talbot Kelly. And so on. In my opinion, it was also a mistake to drop the sketches of penguin under-flippers rather than to improve them. At least they drew attention to the quite diagnostic under-flipper of the Erect-crested Penguin, which enables the most battered, headless corpse to be identified if a flipper is still intact — a fact also unnoted in the text.

In a book of this nature some errors seem inevitable, but more have persisted here than there should with three people to vet facts and figures. A few examples should suffice. The Wandering Albatross incubation period is given as 66 days (p.29) whereas Dr Tickell published the correct figure of 78 days back in 1968. Giant Petrels are said to breed on the Snares: that they don't was published in *Notornis* in 1967. The eyes of the Royal Penguin are not bright geranium red as stated; that is the colour of the adult Rockhopper's irides and a useful recognition character shown in Talbot Kelly's 1966 plate but not in today's 1979 one!

Wandering Albatrosses have been getting a rough deal from artists recently. There are very strange portrayals in Tuck's "Guide to the Seabirds of Britain and the World" and in the "Birds of the Western Palearctic": you might have expected we could do better. Not so. On plate 4 we have a most peculiar Wanderer with a white trailing edge to a blotchy upperwing, whereas in truth the trailing edge remains dark even in old birds. Two other representations of this species labelled immature could be breeders from Antipodes Island, but the existence of large numbers of dark-plumaged adults is not mentioned in the text. Such birds are common in our seas and across the Tasman where NZ-banded birds have been caught off SE Australia.

Wandering Albatross bill colours are seldom accurately shown in paintings — they are pink with horn-coloured tips in life — but in the present work perhaps more confusing is the excessively yellow bill of the Black-browed Mollymawk (plate 5). All the *Procellaria* bills on plate 10 are also poorly shown, the most inaccurate being that of the Grey Petrel, which has been given a bright yellow beak: in life it is greyish black with the side plates the grey-green of old-fashioned dried peas — as noted nearly 50 years ago by Robert Murphy.

On plate 13 we have clear paintings of the storm petrels that should help a lot with their identification. Unfortunately the wings

have been given rather pointed tips. This is a common artist's fault — presumably because they don't know the birds in flight themselves — and hence they draw the outermost primary the longest, which it's not.

A useful innovation is a diagram naming the bill plates of petrels, a figure that follows von Boetticher in his "Albatrosse und anderer Sturmvogel" (1955) and "The Handbook of Australian Sea-birds" (1971). A diagram that is retained from earlier editions of the bills of prions could well have been redrawn as it still shows very narrow-billed *vittata* and *salvini* that would have been better labelled *salvini* and *desolata*.

The content of the work is well organised on lines familiar to users of earlier editions. There are useful end-paper maps and the book is well printed and bound in Collins' admirably tough style designed to stand up to the battering of field use. The book will enable most New Zealand birds to be identified if properly seen: it is mainly with the "difficult" ones that users will encounter frustrations.

JOHN WARHAM

Birds of a feather, edited by Atholl Anderson. 1979. NZ Archaeological Association Monograph II. BAR International Series 62.

This book consists of 17 osteological and archaeological papers written and published in honour of Ron Scarlett. The papers are written, in collaboration or individually, by 22 authors, including Scarlett himself, who apparently collaborated in one paper and wrote another on request without knowing where they were to be published.

The ornithologist with an interest in our extinct birds, or even in the past distribution of our living species and their exploitation by the Maoris will find 7 anthropological papers of little interest but the remaining 10 of much interest. Scarlett (Avifauna and Man), B. F. Leach (Maximising minimum numbers: avian remains from the Washpool midden site), J. M. Davidson (Archaic middens of the Coromandel Range: a review), E. W. Dawson (Some osteological contemplation on Maori and Kakapo in early Wellington) and D. G. Sutton (Island and coastal fowling strategies of the prehistoric Moriori) bring together some interesting analyses of human middens, while G. F. van Tets analyses the avifaunal composition of skua middens on some Australasian sub-antarctic islands. For the taxonomist, J. C. Yaldwyn has shed further light on the types (and validity) of some of the moa species and genera described by W. R. B. Oliver. G. E. Hamel (The breeding ecology of moas) has written a thought-provoking hypothesis that is a timely reminder that moas were once living creatures and that our studies of their bones should aim at giving us a greater understanding of them as birds.

I find this book of great interest, but it is decidedly of more interest to the archaeologist than to an ornithologist whose interest in birds is mainly in living species.

D. H. BRATHWAITE