

*Rails of the world*, by S. Dillon Ripley, with illustrations by J. Fenwick Lansdowne. 1977. Pp. xx + 406. David R. Godine, Boston. \$US 75.00.

This extremely handsome book continues a recent trend towards large, expensive and well-illustrated books on comprehensive reviews of different families of birds. One result is that they all have rather similar titles; for example, Forshaw and Cooper's recent *Parrots of the world*. However, for those with fragile coffee tables, this volume weighs less than half.

The author is well known and so, too, is Storrs L. Olson who has contributed the chapter on fossil rails. Readers may remember that Olson, not long ago, made a contribution on the fossil rails of New Zealand. I must confess that the artist was not previously known to me, but perhaps he should be, as the 41 colour plates he has contributed are magnificent — a difficult standard to achieve, perhaps, when rails are generally rather drab birds. Although the dust-jacket says that all species are illustrated, in fact this is not so: six are missing by my count, at least two of them common species, and their absence cannot be excused on the grounds that there are no specimens available or that plates have not already appeared elsewhere. Perhaps this claim could be corrected in any future edition. There are a few black and white photographs (which in my opinion have only marginal value) and a series of maps and text figures which are very useful indeed.

When a reviewer reads a book of this wide range, it is natural to look most critically at those sections which most closely concern his own country or those species of which he has particular knowledge. Generally, one may assume that mistakes are typical of other sections too, the net result being such a compounding of errors that the book could not be regarded as highly authoritative. In this regard, Ripley has done a satisfactory, though not outstanding job on the living rails of New Zealand. However, it is obvious that, in his self-imposed task of reviewing the family in its world context, he has not been able to keep fully up-to-date, even with the local literature. For example, in his discussion on the Weka he has made some errors: over-emphasising its crepuscular character, being obviously not too familiar with its calls, and over-stating the extent to which wekas have adapted to the urban environment. He even says that wekas have "adaptability to habitat which, as I have pointed out elsewhere, has great survival value." Surely a truism if ever there was one!

His article on the Takahe (which he calls *Porphyrio mantelli*, I think rightly) gives too much emphasis to the species' preference for marshy habitat. Furthermore, he makes such incorrect statements as "no more than two eggs are laid," "no more than one chick is ever reared" and he certainly has incorrect data on the survival of chicks hatched at Mount Bruce between 1972 and 1976. Incidentally, it is gratifying that he has chosen the Takahe as his frontispiece. My main reservations about this fine painting are that the legs are too massive and their colour far too light.

Olson's chapter on fossil species is good and for the New Zealand region he recognises six genera and seven species. His treatment of the fascinating fossil rails of the Hawaiian Islands is too tantalisingly brief. One useful and instructive matter which Olson

discusses is the etymology of the scientific names of the fossil rails; it is a pity that Ripley did not follow him in this, especially as the introductory chapters show that he is not only well read, but writes well.

The book is well designed, well printed and well bound. Although expensive, it is worth buying by those who have \$75.00 to spare; not only for its information and the beauty of its illustrations but also for the rather materialistic reason of a good investment. New Zealand ornithologists should at least try to examine this book; I doubt if the more dedicated could then resist buying a copy if they can get one, which won't be easy.

— G. R. WILLIAMS

*Sounds of New Zealand birds, Vol. 8.* 1977. McPherson Natural History Unit, P.O. Box 21083, Edgeware, Christchurch.

A 45 rpm record of calls of 10 species of wader. All are on the New Zealand list but two (Bristle-thighed Curlew and Upland Plover) are barely so. A third, the Pacific Golden Plover, is represented by tape recordings from Manitoba (*sic*), presumably Manitoba Province and therefore of the American Golden Plover (*dominica*) and not the subspecies (*fulva*) that migrates to New Zealand, though some of its calls seem alike.

The quality is high, with only rare blemishes due to irrelevant background sounds and "blasting" from too high a recording level or too close a microphone, hardly the fault of Mr McPherson. The recordings are bound to intrigue the New Zealand wader-watcher, even if tapes made on boreal breeding grounds have mainly academic interest in the south.

The Eastern Bar-tailed Godwit, recorded at Heathcote Estuary: a lively chorus of flocked birds, presumably at a high tide roost — a nostalgic sound but it does go on and on! Asiatic Black-tailed Godwit: a selection of fascinating, well-recorded calls made on nesting territory, not stated where (French Institut Echo collection). Hudsonian Godwit: calls of male at nest, Fort Churchill, Manitoba; a monotonous series of simple notes so undistinctive that they might be anything (Cornell University). Japanese Snipe: a variety of grating calls against quite a strong background of small passerines and a cuckoo, a veritable "spring cantata" (Radio Japan). Turnstone: an excited sequence of rapidly repeated notes, some of which can, I think, be heard in New Zealand flocks, but the tape was made in June in South Finland.

"Asiatic" Whimbrel: song, calls and alarm notes near nest, recorded in Finnish Lapland and Sweden in June; glorious sounds, beautifully recorded, surely the most exciting passage on the disc. American Whimbrel: recorded on 8 March in Massachusetts, flying over a marsh, presumably on passage, though the date seems too early. The two whimbrels differ strongly but, as the recordings were made at quite different times in the annual cycle, the difference may not be significant. Bristle-thighed Curlew: in flight at Oeno Island (88 km NW of Pitcairn), thus in winter quarters; a musical *tee-a-wee* call echoed apparently by others in the distance. Upland Plover: recorded in New