

# Book reviews

## **A Guide to the Birds of Nepal**

Carol and Tim Inskipp

Croom Helm, Beckenham, Kent, UK, 392 pp, £25

It is a deplorable habit among ornithological reviewers to pick out minor inaccuracies in bird books in an effort to show that they are far more knowledgeable than the authors and should have been asked to write the book in the first place. There is, thank heaven, no need for such nit-picking here. The Inskippes have done a remarkable job in pulling together a huge amount of material (much of it unpublished) to form a summary of the present status and distribution of the birds of this remarkably beautiful country. It could be argued that their efforts are premature, for huge areas of Nepal remain relatively unexplored, but far too much research is never published and far too many good books are postponed or put off for ever. No. The result of their efforts will form a basis for the continued exploration of this still decidedly underworked land.

So much for the good news. By adding bits and bobs, such as a *Where to Watch* guide and a *Field Guide* section (but only to 'difficult birds'), the book has become something of a rag bag. Additionally, the whole text looks as if it has been knocked out on my old portable typewriter and flows from section to section without a break. Book design is an art. In its presentation and production this book is artless and, presumably, lacks a designer. The result is one of the most awkward books to use I have encountered. A single example will suffice.

Try to find slender-billed warbler. Start at the Index, which covers over seven pages, each divided into four columns in the smallest typeface I have ever seen. With considerable eyestrain one realizes that the Index is of scientific names. Thumb forward and there are English names—bingo! . . . '74, 279, P14'. Page 74 covers identification. On to page 279 where we find that its status is a vagrant—a single record. On to P14. P14? There is no Plate 14. Right, try P14. We turn to Plate 4. There we find 14 numbered birds, but which is the slender-billed? Wait a minute . . . there was a List of Illustrations at the front. Off to page 6. There it is 'Plate 4 Phylloscopus Warblers with wingbars'. That's not much use. Fortunately opposite is page 7 with a 'Key to the Colour

Plates'. We look down and . . . oh dear, no slender-billed on Plate 4. But . . . there it is on Plate 5 . . . numbers 1 and 2. So we find our bird. Even without the Index mistake it would have been an ordeal.

Poor Carol, poor Tim—their efforts deserved better. There is no excuse for sloppy publishing—especially at £25 a throw.

*John Gooders, author (whose New Where to Watch Birds is due to be published this month).*

## **The Natural History of Otters**

Paul Chanin

Croom Helm (in association with the Mammal Society), 1985, 179 pp, PB £7.95, HB £12.95

*The Natural History of Otters* is the first in a new series of mammal books for the general reader, produced in association with the Mammal Society. I hope those that follow are as good. This one has 179 pages of clearly presented information about the world's otters, not just *Lutra lutra*. This attempt at comprehensiveness works because there are only nine species, though the distinctiveness of the sea otter then becomes very evident from its separate treatment in several sections. Research on otters is reviewed in a helpful way, with not so much detail being given that general points become obscured, yet the treatment is certainly not superficial. Apart from defining exactly what an otter is and how it is adapted to being one, the book offers chapters on food and feeding behaviour, relations with other animals (including mink), social organization (including territoriality and pheromones) and life history. The chapter on otters and man, though predictable, is nevertheless interesting. It describes first how the otter was once regarded as a pest to be destroyed, then as a valued animal of the chase, and now it is strictly protected, rarely seen (even by the author himself!) and almost as legendary as the Loch Ness monster. This chapter also includes a review of otters and the fur trade (especially sea otters) and the need for conservation measures before the few species of Lutrinae become even fewer. There are 9 pages of useful bibliography, 17 colour plates (and an endearing front cover), plus 50 maps, graphs and line drawings to enhance the clear and neatly

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presented text. A good book and good value for money.

*Pat Morris, Lecturer in Zoology, Royal Holloway College, University of London*

## **Threatened Swallowtail Butterflies of the World** (The IUCN Red Data Book)

N. Mark Collins and Michael G. Morris  
IUCN, Gland, Switzerland, and Cambridge, UK, HB £18.00

This 400-page volume includes five major sections: the biology of papilionids and their basic conservation requirements, distribution and status, critical faunas analysis, trade, and a review of threatened species; two appendices: swallowtails in threatened categories, and species requiring further research; an index; and eight colour plates illustrating 40 of the threatened taxa.

The informative first section is followed by a 100-page encyclopaedia, with entries for all 573 recognized species. Such a truly systematic approach lays the foundation for the unique qualities of this book. To quote the authors, this 'is the first worldwide assessment of the conservation needs of any invertebrate group, and the first Red Data Book to be based on a published consideration of every species in the taxon under review'. Bold claims—fully vindicated by the text. Their approach is vital for two major reasons: first, it makes such a work invaluable *in its own right*—Collins and Morris is not merely a *review*, it is a primary reference source. Secondly, the comprehensive approach permits quantification, such as the critical faunas analysis presented in Part 3, which indicates a 'top 5' list of Indonesia, Philippines, China, Brazil and Madagascar. Between them, these countries possess more than half the world's swallowtail butterfly species—including 110 not found anywhere else. Clearly, any swallowtail conservation strategy that fails to involve these five nations cannot be effective. One wonders what sort of list would emerge from similar treatment of a variety of plant as well as animal groups—'critical FF-analysis'.

Such considerations pose a further question: have those organizations responsible for global conservation programmes already done this work—or is species conservation essentially *ad hoc*? Of course, complete objectivity is never possible, and reality is often overwhelmingly

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complex. Nonetheless, I believe that it is essential to develop methods that allow as much objectivity as possible, and reduce complexities to manageable proportions. What I like so much about this latest Red Data Book is that it offers a way forward from the apparently random approach to so much conservation planning.

If it should be contended that time is too short to make such global assessments, and the data are too hard to find, then one need only point to this remarkable book, completed in only two years. In fact, there is no lack of data—it is just a matter of getting on with it, extracting, collating, organizing, analysing. Now we even have cheap computers to help us. Is there, then, some lack of will—are we frightened to take a global view, to make choices, make rational decisions, for fear of having to put our own pet projects into perspective, or even into limbo?

I consider this book to be an outstanding achievement. On first picking it up, I was struck by a moment's egotistical sadness—why hadn't I written this thing myself! *Threatened Swallowtail Butterflies of the World* represents a watershed in our approach to species conservation strategy.

*R. I. Vane-Wright, Department of Entomology, British Museum (Natural History)*

## **The Wilderness Guardian—A Practical Guide to Fieldwork Related to Wildlife Conservation** Timothy Corfield

Published by the David Sheldrick Wildlife Appeal, PO Box 48177, Nairobi, Kenya, and available in UK from the Eden Wildlife Trust, 10 Oriel Hill, Camberley, Surrey GU15 2JW, UK, £15 plus £1.50 for postage and packing

This is one book that I hope never to see on a conservationist's bookshelf, but rather in his pocket or on the dashboard of his landrover, for this is an eminently practical volume.

Dedicated to the memory of David Sheldrick, first warden of Tsavo East National Park, Kenya, it is an encyclopaedic compilation of the diverse skills and knowledge a game warden is expected to possess. The information on wildlife is specific to Africa, but the book would be of value to wardens and park rangers in any country. The natural history section is a curious selection—26 pages on insects, one-and-a-half pages on snakes and

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