

Book Reviews

Threatened Birds of the World. BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL (2000).
Barcelona and Cambridge, UK: Lynx Edicions and BirdLife International. 852
pages, £70.

Threatened Birds of the World is the latest version of the Red Data Book for birds, but we have come some way since the first version appeared in the 1960s. The old style 'red list' was superseded by *Birds to Watch* in 1984, which gave a few lines of information for each threatened species (but did not categorise the threat), and introduced the threatened-species-by-country format in an appendix. *Birds to Watch 2*, published in 1994, was a marked improvement in the detail of information provided, with an introductory section on threat criteria, and some analyses of overall trends and factors involved in threats to the world's birds. The species accounts were also improved by including the threat category and the criteria fulfilled – essential in improving the utility of the work for practical conservation. Now we have 'Birds to Watch 3', which has been given the more appropriate (but less imaginative) title *Threatened Birds of the World*. Once again there has been a marked advance in the quality and quantity of information provided, and as a result this book is a hard bound 852 pages of A4 compared to a soft bound 407 pages of A5 in *Birds to Watch 2*.

An extensive introduction includes analyses of patterns in the distribution of threatened birds, both geographically and by habitat. It also identifies the most common types of threats, and then describes some of the conservation action being undertaken. Another section describes the criteria used to assess threat. The bulk of the book consists of species accounts (two per page), with threat category indicated, followed by a brief summary of the reasons for its categorisation. Basic statistics are provided on range size, estimated population size (as one of several categories) and altitude range, with a simple statement of habitat and threats. The main bulk of the text for each species covers range and population, ecology, threats, conservation and targets. These are all necessarily brief, but even so there is a large amount of information in a small space on the page, a feat achieved without making the page look cluttered. References are provided for every species. Importantly, for each species there is a thumbnail illustration and distribution map, and identification and taxonomic notes (all new features for the series).

As well as the listing of threatened species, there is now a much more complex and detailed listing of 'lower risk' species, sub-divided into 'conservation dependent', 'near-threatened' and 'least concern'. In the past, the only information provided for these species was country/ies of occurrence: this is greatly improved in this book, with the level of detail equivalent to that provided for the 'fully' threatened species in *Birds to Watch 2*. Further categories in which species are placed are 'extinct', 'extinct in the wild', 'data deficient' and 'not

evaluated', with similar detail provided for each. Finally, as in previous editions, a country-by-country section lists all threatened, conservation dependent, near-threatened and data deficient species by territory, a handy summary of the threatened and near-threatened avifauna of any individual country.

There can be little argument that this book is the definitive guide to the world's threatened birds. Such a wealth of information, involving nearly 1000 contributors is unlikely to be matched elsewhere. The advances made in presentation since the original *Birds To Watch* have made it an invaluable resource to anyone involved in bird conservation. To highlight minor quibbles might therefore seem churlish, but I have a couple of criticisms worth discussing. Firstly, I am not convinced of the benefit of the additional 'lower risk' categories introduced in this edition. Although the process by which threat status is categorised is described in a useful diagram, it implies that if a species isn't evaluated it is categorised as 'not evaluated', yet only seven species are listed as 'not-evaluated', which actually applies only to those species of debatable taxonomic status. If a species is evaluated it should appear either as data-deficient, in one of the lower risk categories, or in one of the threat categories. Yet obviously not all the world's species are covered in this book. In the absence of any indication as to how the process is initiated for any particular species (i.e. how does a species come up for evaluation in the first place?), one might conclude either that all species classed as of 'least concern' aren't actually of any concern at all, or that everything not in the book isn't of any concern. In fact, 'least concern' means that the species has had its threat status 'downlisted' since previous editions, though it takes a fair amount of digging to find this. Certainly, the terms 'least concern' and 'not-evaluated' might have been more clearly explained, or perhaps alternative terms should have been sought. While I fully support the concept of 'near-threatened', as a way of highlighting those species not quite classed as threatened (a sort of 'amber alert'), 'data-deficient', to highlight those species for which more data are needed, and 'conservation dependent' for those dependent on conservation action, further division of these 'non-threatened' categories seems rather unnecessary and confusing to me.

My second criticism is of the referencing for species occurring in Asia. While extensive references are given for other species, just one citation is frequently made for Asian species (this being 'BirdLife International in prep.' i.e. *The Threatened Birds of Asia*). This is unfortunate, as it requires reference to another book, which at the time of writing is awaiting publication, and which, in many cases, is not the primary reference for the facts presented. No doubt this has saved considerable time and space but the value of the references in this book are diminished as a result.

These criticisms do not detract greatly from the value of this work however. Needless to say, the volume of information provided comes at a price far higher than that of earlier editions, but by paying it there is no doubt you are acquiring the definitive guide to the world's threatened birds.

Available from specialised bookshops and from Lynx Edicions, Passeig de Gracia, 12, Barcelona, Spain.

SEB BUCKTON

Artenschutzprogramm Wachtelkönig in der Schweiz/Plan d'action pour le Râle des genêts en Suisse/Species Action Plan for the Corncrake in Switzerland. HEER,L., MAUMARY,L., LAESSER,J. & MÜLLER,W. (2000). Schweizer Vogel-schutz SVS – BirdLife Schweiz/Association Suisse pour la Protection des Oiseaux ASPO – BirdLife Suisse/SVS: BirdLife Switzerland, Zürich. 99 pages, Francs 39.00.

This action plan for Corncrake *Crex crex* is excellent. It is presented in three languages: German, French, and English. The English translation is very good throughout, and the whole report is well presented with a selection of high quality photographs (colour and black and white), several vignettes and maps, serving nicely to break up the text and illustrating the bird and its habitat.

The report summary highlights the present threatened status of Corncrake in Switzerland, outlines the habitat requirements of the species and the main reasons for population declines. It is divided into four main chapters; ecology and status; causes of decline and conservation measures; international and national cooperation; and Corncrake protection and its implications. Finally a fairly extensive and up to date reference list is given.

As well as the perhaps more predictable (but necessary) coverage, including sections on identification, basic ecology, and the generally accepted 'Corncrake-friendly mowing methods', there are additionally several interesting and informative sections. There is a detailed account of the 'National Corncrake Survey' describing male singing activity and the complexities of ascertaining size of populations through mapping of calling males. Concise instructions on survey techniques and methods of confirmation of pair formation and breeding status are given. Methods of analysing sonograms/oscillograms (derived from calling males) are described, useful in ascertaining changes in location within a locality of a roving individual; in distinguishing between two males in close proximity even if not calling simultaneously; and in estimation of home range. There is also a detailed overview of preferred breeding habitat, identifying the importance of vegetation structure, floral composition, food availability and other factors important for successful reproduction. Numerous tables and graphs summarise the data presented.

In summary this is a well-written and well-presented publication. For those with an interest in Corncrakes, even though it is of course directed to Corncrake conservation in Switzerland, it contains much information relevant not just in a Swiss context, but to all countries supporting breeding populations of this rare rallid.

Snipes of the Western Palearctic. ROUXEL, R. (2000). Ed. OMPO (Oiseaux Migrateurs du Paléarctique Occidental-Migratory Birds of the Western Palearctic): Eveil Nature, Saint Yrieix sur Charente, France. 304 pages, £31.50

This book, originally written in French and translated into English, covers the three species of snipe (Common *Gallinago gallinago*, Great *G.media* and Jack *Lymnocyptes minimus*) that breed in the Western Palearctic. After an introduction to snipe taxonomy the book is divided into three main chapters, one covering each

of the three species. There are then a further three shorter chapters covering legislation and directives of relevance to these species and their conservation. The book contains a lot of information, is illustrated by many good quality colour photographs and has a comprehensive bibliography.

Unfortunately, however, there is a major problem. It appears almost throughout (I didn't read the whole book) that the text is a literal translation from French to English. As such it reads badly, and in some cases it is difficult to ascertain what exactly some sentences mean. With more care it would have been possible to have produced a readable text. As it stands, right from the outset, the text is very clumsily translated and rather confusing. There are also many grammatical errors, some stemming presumably from the translators lack of biological knowledge: the plural of 'genus' (genera) is written as 'genuses'; the abbreviated plural of species (spp.) is incorrectly given as 'sp'; the word 'strains' is often used in place of 'subspecies' or 'race'; 'average' is used where 'mean' would be better; 'moult' is misspelt 'molt'; the genus of rush *Juncus* is misspelt 'Joncus'; a table entitled 'The Legal status of the Common Snipe in some countries of the Western Palearctic' (note misspellings of 'some' and 'arctic') erroneously includes Guinea and Benin. And so it goes on.

It is a pity that the translation is so poor and that such errors as indicated are so prevalent, after clearly so much effort has been made by the author to compile the information incorporated within the book from so many sources.

Birds of Nepal. GRIMMETT, R., INSKIPP, C. & INSKIPP, T. (2000). Christopher Helm (Publishers) Ltd., London. 288 pages, £19.99

This is the first comprehensive field guide to the birds of Nepal, with identification texts based on the *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* (1998) by the same authors. The bird illustrations, good to excellent throughout, are almost all taken from this earlier publication, with a few additional illustrations of races occurring in Nepal, commissioned especially. For the visiting birder it undoubtedly is the field guide to take, being of high quality and a size compact enough to shove into a largish jacket pocket or slotted into a day sack. As well as being of benefit to foreign birders, it will hopefully encourage more Nepalese to become interested in their varied and interesting avifauna, and serve as a useful source of reference and conservation tool for the increasing number of Nepalese working in the field of nature conservation. It was good to see the section at the beginning of the book on bird conservation, written by Hem Sagar Baral, president of Bird Conservation Nepal.

The only things that I can be critical about are minor. The cover is not of a tough enough material, but easily rectifiable by adding one's own plastic cover. I'm not used to the order in which the birds appear, and find it a bit disconcerting that grebes, cormorants, herons and storks are placed at the end of the non-passerines. Several of the plate layouts are a bit clumsy (e.g. laughingthrushes & babblers, plates 88-90) and quite a few species are to a very different scale (e.g. plate 4 where the four Kalij Pheasants sandwich in the peafowl, which are rather small; plate 33, the pratincoles appearing much larger than the *Vanellus* plovers;

plate 69, the shortwings are too small relative to the *Luscinia* chats; plate 70, White-rumped Shama is much too big in relation to the other species).

The species texts, on the facing page to the plates, are too brief for some and there is a lot of blank space on some pages that could have usefully been filled with more information, such as descriptions of vocalisations, omitted for many species. Finally there are 11 tables towards the end of the book to aid identification of difficult groups eg. *Phylloscopus* warblers and rosefinches, but nowhere in the species texts is one directed to these.

Despite these minor criticisms, this is an excellent guide and well-worth getting hold of if planning a trip to Nepal.

DAVE SHOWLER

