

REVIEWS

Systematic Notes on Asian Birds 2010

British Ornithologists' Club Occasional Publications No. 5

Softback. 148 pages, colour photos, maps and sonograms.
£18.

Available from www.boc-online.org/publications.htm

Edited once again by David Wells, but emerging now under the BOC umbrella after a four-year publishing hiatus, the latest *SNAB* series contains ten contributions on the nomenclature, systematics and type specimens of Asian birds. The *SNAB* region embraces Afghanistan and thus the easternmost limit of OSME territory too. The undoubted highlight of this issue for most readers will be Jochen Marten's 75-page review of the leaf warbler genera *Phylloscopus* and *Seicercus*, which covers (mostly as extralimitals) a handful of taxa from our region, perhaps most notably Green Warbler *Phylloscopus nitidus* and Mountain Chiffchaff *P. sindianus*. The former is maintained as a subspecies of Greenish Warbler *P. trochiloides* by Martens, who also, unsurprisingly, treats *P. lorenzii* as a subspecies of *P. sindianus*. There are occasional slips, for instance in discussing Chiffchaff *P. collybita tristis*, Martens states that mixed songsters have been "noticed in the Orenburg region

of the northern Urals", when this locality could scarcely be further south in the Ural mountains, but generally Martens has done an excellent job of synthesising our current knowledge of the distribution, taxonomy and vocalisations of most Asian leaf warblers. Overall, serious students of Asian birds will want the present volume close at hand.

Guy M Kirwan

Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia

Michael C Jennings. 2010.

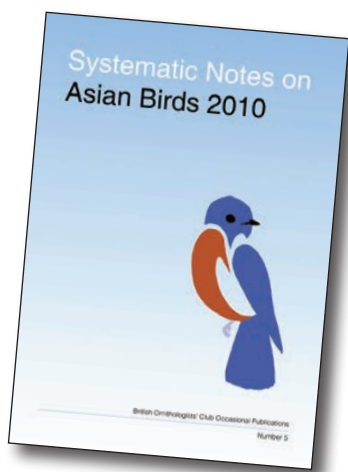
Fauna of Arabia vol 25.

Hardback. 772 pages, 106 colour photos, numerous figures and maps.

£159 from NHBS.

ISBN 978-3-929907-83-4

If you browse any recent atlas of the breeding avifauna of a country or region, you are struck by the vast scale of the enterprise, which thought leads to the sheer scope of organising such an achievement. Often, such atlases have been inspired by forerunners organised, compiled and printed manually, with the same kind of teamwork always evident. However, a typical early atlas differed in one respect: it was inspired by a single individual, not a committee or an organisation. Modern atlases require from the outset the involvement of many organisations and committees, making it both unexpected and a delight to find that the driving force for the *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia* is one man's dogged persistence. It has taken Mike Jennings over a quarter of a century to initiate the project, establish data collection and processing in this way, all through his love of Arabian birds and the land they inhabit. Yet when you consider the immense undertaking required to survey almost four million square kilometres of land and its offshore islands, where relatively little was known of its natural history, then you might have considered him hopelessly optimistic when he started. Fortunately, the development of technology such as GPS and



the advent of the rental car in Arabia helped shorten the project considerably!

Now, Mike is shrewd, persuasive and delightfully stubborn. Through his interest in birds while in the Middle East, he had already begun to meet people with whom he would correspond and work with during the ABBA project, perhaps the most serendipitous being Effie Warr, who following a stint in Sharjah, went on to work at what is now the Natural History Museum at Tring, a circumstance vital to the project's impetus. In his search for relevant literature, his pursuit of individual and historical records, the recruitment of survey workers and the need for a supportive publisher, Mike acquired a web of contacts that eventually comprised the army of people and organisations mentioned in the Acknowledgements. You can learn much from this section in a book; is the tone grudging, dutiful or heartfelt? Suffice to say that in ABBA, this section is well worth reading on its own merits. In the preceding preliminary matter, the author has provided sound justification of the methodology selected, essentially the best possible given the resources and sheer size of the task, but he also details how older records were used or discarded. The recent exposure of Meinertzhagen's compulsive fraudulence tarnishes even his earliest work to some degree, and so ABBA cites Meinertzhagen only where supported by other authorities.

Clearly, the idea brought to mind at the mention of a breeding bird atlas is one of a helpful map and a useful text, preferably within a standard overall format. I'll return to that aspect a little later, but first I must enthuse over a most welcome surprise. The 110 pages (and five chapters) that precede the species accounts convey succinctly and fluently more than 70 relevant factors and issues, under the following headings: Aspects of Arabian Ornithology, Factors Affecting Bird Distribution in Arabia, Regional Bird Communities and Habitats, and Conservation. Often you acquire the sense that such contextual matter has been cobbled together as an afterthought in an endeavour to make the book appear authoritative, but this is far from the case here, where the presentation of



vital context achieves excellence. Here, you will find well-chosen maps and illustrations (many superb bird pictures), but most importantly, excellent overviews of the changes that have occurred at landscape scale and their effects, of endemism, of the rise in exotic species and the establishment of feral populations, of geographic and climatic influences, of important plants, of habitats and of habitat changes, and of conservation issues and of protection measures in state legislation and implementation. These chapters contain much to absorb and ponder.

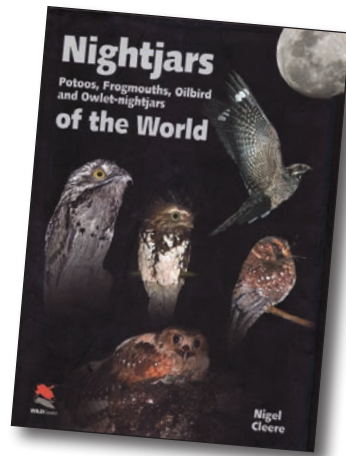
Chapter 5 is concerned with the practical aspects of presentation of information and data in the species accounts, and if nits are to be picked by other reviewers, it will be under 'Nomenclature and taxonomy'. On first reading, I confess I might have joined that critical community, but having been slowly through the 751 pages several times, I have to say that the author's eclectic approach applies in just a few cases and is not a problem. It might cause readers a little more work at times, but arguably that's no bad thing. Yes, I found some minor quibbles, but few enough, especially in the copy-editing, not to raise my pedantic hackles. However, the high price and the cover design are negative selling points.

The map scale is of half-degree units, divided into quadrats. Anything finer would not fit into the book. The survey area comprises Saudi Arabia, Yemen (including

the Socotra archipelago), Oman, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and offshore islands. The species accounts cover 273 current breeding and 24 past or highly likely breeding species, most with generous text, accompanied in selected cases by a useful table. In addition to English and scientific names, Arabic names are supplied for all species. The layouts, with attractive species vignettes, vary in length according to content. Choosing location names at random from the text, I found every one in the Gazetteer. The species accounts reflect the intensity of the 40 survey expeditions mounted by the author and his colleagues; the descriptions of finding birds convey immediacy. On the species account maps, records prior to 1984 stand out in red and post-1984 (when the author carried out his first survey) in blue. The three common dot sizes (largest first) convey confirmed breeding, probable breeding and presence or other records. Other symbols are used occasionally. Two aspects bring these species accounts very much to life: the contextual habitat and behaviour information, and the description of the effect of man-made changes within the 25-year survey period.

How best to summarise ABBA then? Although I find no difficulty in arguing that, if there is such a thing as having a 'Magnificent Obsession', Mike Jennings certainly qualifies in this respect, he would be the first to pay tribute to his army of helpers, colleagues, contributors, sponsors and all those who have encouraged him in the slightest way. This book can rightly be expressed as a monumental achievement, but its importance is that it provides the first baseline for future work, especially bird monitoring studies that help measure habitat quality and quantify changes to them. It will do much to encourage other countries and areas in the OSME Region to follow suit, but my immediate wish would be for the Saudi Wildlife Commission to plan for researchers to survey all of the remaining remote quadrats. I would also suggest that follow-up work be centralised on the internet, much in the way that The European Bird Census Council has done on its website.

Mike Blair



Nightjars of the World

Nigel Cleere. 2010.

WILDGuides, Maidenhead.

Hardback. 464 pages, 590 colour photos and many maps.

£45.

ISBN 978-1-903657-07-2

As an impressionable young birdwatcher, my seniors planted the idea in my mind that photographic guides were inferior to their paintings-based cousins. Even if this was the case, photography has advanced beyond recognition. *Nightjars of the World* instantly dispelled any lingering doubts I may have harboured about photographic guides. Even before delving inside, the front cover set the scene, capturing the imagination with evocatively presented portraits of several difficult-to-photograph and/or sought-after species.

Caprimulgidiform distribution, plumage, general biology and taxonomy are dealt with first, clearly and very readably. The summary range maps for different families/subfamilies present the reader with an interesting overview of the distribution of the major groups of Caprimulgidiformes. The early mention of the ecological significance of plumage type (cryptic, variegated or spotted) provides a valuable point of reference when reading the species accounts. And whilst the details of Caprimulgidiform taxonomy might not be to everyone's taste, this is covered clearly and understandably.

The stated aim of the book is to present an easy-to-use guide to identify nightjars and related birds. The well-organised layout and generous use of space for photographs and maps in the species accounts certainly go a long way towards achieving this aim. The vast majority of the photographs are of astonishingly high quality, especially considering the subject matter; the few that are not still provide a very useful reference to the least-known members of the group. Bearing in mind that it is usually only possible to scrutinise the plumage details of nightjars at rest or in the hand, it is entirely fitting that the vast majority of the images depict roosting birds. Having said that, efforts have been made to include flight shots where appropriate, *Nacunda* Nighthawk *Podager nacunda* being a good example.

Identification notes are succinct, picking out the key features of males and females (and immatures where known), rather than repeating what is shown by the photographs. A minor criticism is the lack of any attempt to describe the jizz and/or mode of feeding, both of which constitute important clues to field identification for several species. Subspecies are dealt with by way of citation and, in some cases, photographs; Middle East enthusiasts may be disappointed to find that no photographs of the eastern races of European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus* are included, these races instead being treated thus: "Medium-sized, variegated greyish-brown [nominata], sandy-brown (*plumipes*) or greyish (*unwini*) nightjar."

The maps are large, detailed and generally very easy to interpret. Considering the ample space afforded to them though, a reminder of the key would be a useful addition for migratory species with multiple subspecies, in particular Lesser Nighthawk *Chordeiles acutipennis*. This, however, is an extremely minor point; they are a welcome 'breath of fresh air' compared to the black-and-white and/or markedly smaller offerings in several broadly comparable publications.

The introduction closes thus: "By providing a tool to help identify nightjars, frogmouths, potoos, owlet-nightjars and the Oilbird it is hoped to stimulate greater interest in finding, observing and studying these

phantoms of the night." Anyone who opens *Nightjars of the World* cannot fail to be inspired by the contents. Sales support the BirdLife Preventing Extinctions programme and there can be no more personally satisfying way to contribute to this crucial initiative than by purchasing this remarkable book.

Nick Moran

Breeding Birds of the United Arab Emirates

Simon Aspinall. 2010.

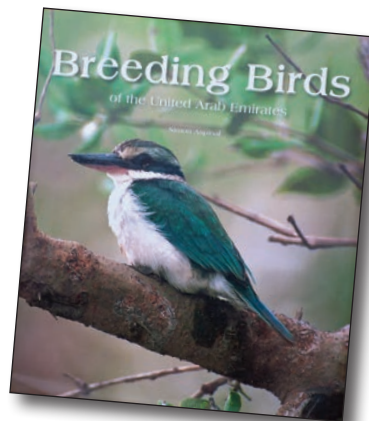
Environment Agency-Abu Dhabi.

Hardback. 241 pages, colour photos and maps throughout, four tables.

ISBN 9948-408-22-5

This is the second English language edition of Simon Aspinall's book (1996, Hobby Publications Liverpool/Dubai) on the status and conservation of the breeding birds of the UAE. An Arabic edition, revised from the English first edition, was published in 2004. Although there are many similarities in organisation and layout, the page size of the book has increased considerably. The 1996 edition has 20 pages of colour photos of birds placed together half way through the book whereas the current book has colour photos on most pages and they are usually reproduced at a large scale. One reason for obtaining the book is for these photos, they are excellent and different from those in the new UAE checklist (2010, *Sandgrouse* Supplement 3).

The book contains various introductory materials, a section on conservation activities



in the UAE, a list of priority breeding species, an annotated list of areas of importance to wildlife and a gazetteer. The bulk of the book is the species accounts, on pages 35–202. These deal with all native breeding species of the UAE plus ‘naturalised’ breeding species. Most of the accounts follow a standard sequence, as that of the 1996 edition, namely an introduction, ‘Present knowledge’, ‘Gazetted sites’ and ‘Threats and actions proposed’. ‘Present knowledge’ provides details of the status of the species in the UAE, updated to 2009, followed by an estimate or guesstimate of the UAE breeding population size. The Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia Project map for the UAE “updated here with all available records up to and including 2005” is presented plus a status summary for the Middle East. ‘Gazetted sites’ are those formally *documented* as important for the species. Following the species accounts are sections concerning potential natural colonists and escapes and introduced species that are not free living/self sustaining.

The book does have a few problems that another round of editing would have corrected. Surprisingly, the author’s name is misspelt on the front cover and dust jacket, but luckily not on the title page. Figure 3 is missing the comparison of total number of breeding species by ABBA square to 2005. No key is provided for the different circle sizes on the ABBA maps and Tables 2–4 are missing. If you are interested in the ornithology of Arabia, however, you need a copy.

Peter Cowan

Birds of the Middle East.

Second edition

Richard Porter & Simon Aspinall,
illustrated by John Gale, Mike Langman &
Brian Small. 2010.

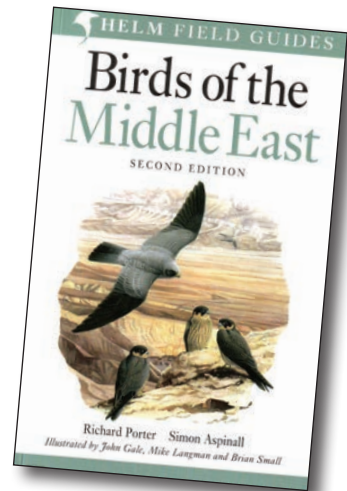
Christopher Helm.

Softback. 384 pages, 176 colour plates.

£29.99

ISBN 978-07136-76020.

The excellent field guide to the *Birds of the Middle East* by Porter, Christensen and Schiermacker-Hansen has been the standard field guide for birders visiting the OSME region since its publication in 1996. We now have a second



edition, so how does it compare? Firstly, there are some obvious differences. For this edition, authorial mainstay Richard Porter has been joined by Simon Aspinall. Steen Christensen sadly died in 2008 and Per Schiermacker-Hansen “sensibly decided to go travelling instead”. The team of artists is reduced by one, with Andrew Birch ‘departing’.

However, the most striking change is that the layout of the book is now a much more user friendly one, with the text and map for each species facing the relevant plate. Clearly this is a significant improvement, saving the time it takes to flick between the relevant text and illustration. The overall number of plates has increased from 112 to 176 and many images have also been re-arranged to accommodate the new design. Some plates have been split into two (eg nightjars *Caprimulgus*) with the benefit being to permit reproduction of the illustrations at a slightly larger scale. Illustrations retained from the first edition have not always been enlarged and there are a few quite empty-looking plates, but better this than to have the sometimes over-crowded plates that have characterised guides to some other regions. Most of the illustrations are retained from the first edition, but there are quite a few completely new ones whilst others are reproduced from the *Birds of the Horn of Africa* (Redman *et al* 2009), also published by Helm. The new illustrations are largely successful and improve those that they replace. In particular, the *Phylloscopus* and *Hippolais/Iduna* warblers represent significant

improvements, and the new nuthatch (*Sitta*) depictions are also pleasing. I'd like to have seen even more of the retained plates updating. For example, the *Acrocephalus* have always seemed a little 'overweight' to my eye, but overall the standard has been improved and this continues to be a very good set of plates.

The number of species and recognisable subspecies covered has increased by over 130, with occurrences of species genuinely new to the region and taxonomic changes responsible. The continued inclusion of species that are now considered doubtful members of the Middle Eastern avifauna (eg *Güldenstadt's* Redstart *Phoenicurus erythrogastrus*, Asian Dowitcher *Limnodromus semipalmatus*) may surprise some but, as the authors point out, they remain reasonable candidates for future occurrence and their inclusion is sensible. The sequence, taxonomy and nomenclature generally follow those adopted by the OSME Region List (which in turn broadly follows Dickinson (ed) *The Howard and Moore Complete Checklist of the Birds of the World*). Although the significant changes that currently affect taxonomic thinking necessitate name changes, unnecessary modifications to well-established English names should certainly be avoided. It is therefore pleasing that the authors have avoided the temptation to meddle with those vernacular names employed here.

The species accounts have been extensively revised in order to include the most up-to-date knowledge where possible, including all significant taxonomic changes. This has resulted in comprehensive coverage of recent splits, so we now have full treatment of tricky problems such as the identification of the large white-headed gulls (up from three accounts to eight here) and the separation of Sykes's *Iduna rama* and Booted Warblers *I. caligata*, Red-breasted *Ficedula parva* and Taiga Flycatchers *F. albicilla*, and Turkestan *Lanius phoenicuroides* and Daurian Shrikes *L. isabellinus*, among others. It is also pleasing to see taxa that are identifiable in the field, but for which there

is still some debate about whether they are species allocated their own accounts, and thus afforded more complete coverage. These are included with a trinomial; examples include Arabian Scops Owl *Otus (senegalensis) pamelae*, Steppe Grey Shrike *Lanius (meridionalis) pallidirostris* and Mesopotamian Crow *Corvus (cornix) capellanus*.

Although reproduced on a smaller scale than before, the maps have been updated and improved significantly. Gone are depictions solely of the breeding range. We can now easily distinguish between resident (green) and migrant (orange) breeders. Ranges are also mapped for species that 'just' winter in or migrate through the region. With so many species known in the region solely as migrants and with the Middle East having very prolonged migration periods, defining the winter period, in the south of the region in particular, is problematic. Thus blue hatching defines the range of a bird during the passage or winter seasons, with a simple note in the text adding further clarification, which makes for a 'happy' compromise.

The review copy is a softback. My hardcover copy of the first edition has endured well the rigours of nearly 15 years of regular use. I am sure that my copy of the new edition will not be in such good condition after a similar period. However, the soft cover is better suited to being slipped into a pocket. I suspect the merits of hardback compared to softback split opinion. Personally I'd prefer a hard cover, but discussions with members of a recent tour group I was leading suggests that would be a minority view.

So, the question is, "if you have the first edition, do you need to invest in the second edition?" For me the answer is certainly yes. The improved design, revised taxonomy, updated text and illustrations, updated and clearer distribution maps are all excellent reasons to make sure you have the second edition with you when you next venture into the field.

Chris Bradshaw