

REVIEWS

Common Birds of Qatar

Hanne Eriksen, Jens Eriksen & Frances Gillespie. 2010.

Softback. 248 pages, 400 colour photos and 215 colour maps.

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The *Common Birds of Qatar* is aimed at the novice birdwatcher in Qatar. The book contains >400 photographs by renowned bird photographers Hanne & Jens Eriksen. Co-author Frances Gillespie is not a birdwatcher but does possess broad natural history interests.

The bulk of the book is the 215 species accounts. However, Caspian Gull *Larus cachinnans* shares a page with Steppe Gull *L. barabensis* (treated here as a separate species), while Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia* is discussed on the Common Nightingale *L. megarhynchos* page and Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maurus* is treated as a full species alongside European Stonechat *S. torquatus*, thus 218 species are actually covered. Each species is treated on one page with at least one and often two or more photos, text, a distribution map, and a guide to occurrence through the year. The introduction provides advice on how to watch and identify birds, equipment to use, and where to find birds in Qatar.

The introduction mentions that rarer species were deliberately excluded, but a supplementary list of additional species recorded in Qatar would have been useful. As of June 2011 the official Qatar list stands at 294 species, so the 218 species treated represents most regularly occurring species. Species are not arranged in systematic order but are grouped according to three colour-coded habitat designations; green for gardens, parks and farms (107 species), blue for wetlands and coast (100 species) and yellow for desert (11 species). We are unconvinced that this approach aids the identification of an unfamiliar bird. Firstly, it might be expected that taxonomic groups be dealt with over

adjoining pages within one habitat; however, the book takes the habitat-first criterion too far, which in our opinion is unhelpful.

The distribution maps are nicely presented using four colours, pink for resident, yellow for summer visitor, and blue for winter visitor. Solid green is used for passage migrants and we feel that solid colours are a little 'all or nothing' for the majority of passage and non-breeding species, which would be better served by pale stippling or cross-hatching. The shades used also seem somewhat on the garish side.

Qatar is a very small country and some passage migrants could be seen just about anywhere. Freshwater species clearly will tend to be found in a few suitable areas and rather than trying to reflect freshwater concentrations in the maps, it might have been better to use a broad-brush approach across the country.

Each species has a calendar with one of four different thickness bars to represent abundance. We believe this is the right approach but probably, given the current state of knowledge, a little too ambitious in that the precision that is often given may be spurious and mislead beginners into dismissing a species based on a blank box. We appreciate that to create these diagrams was highly ambitious and involved much effort, particularly by Dr Brian Hunter, who provided most of the relevant data. Nonetheless, far too many species are considered 'common' (63 species) at some point in the year, most of which are uncommon at best. Examples of residents are Alexandrine Parakeet *Psittacula eupatria*, shown as common, when between us we have nearly 20 years experience in Qatar and have seen it twice. For non-breeders we find it hard to agree with 'common' status, for any month, for Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*, Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga*, White-tailed Lapwing *Vanellus leucurus*, Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*, Marsh Sandpiper *T. stagnatilis*, Swift Tern *Sterna bergii*, Common Tern *S. hirundo*, Bridled Tern *Onychoprion anaethetus*, Eurasian Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus*, Woodchat Shrike *Lanius senator*,

Masked Shrike *L. nubicus*, Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* and Red-tailed Wheatear *Oenanthe xanthopygma*.

Perhaps the book's strength lies in the choice of photographs, which nicely illustrate the birds. No claim is made as to the percentage taken in Qatar, but it is probably <25%. This is not necessarily a problem but under a 'scientific' approach photographs would be afforded a date and location, whereas no such data appear herein. Are the photographs helpful for identification? Given that the text is rather uninspiring and somewhat ponderous, with few indications that the writers are discussing identification features within the context of Qatar, a single example will suffice. Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*

is by far the most frequently recorded grey goose in Qatar, but all records have been first-winters, which show no white on the face. This fact is not mentioned in the text or illustrated in the photo.

In summary, a well-produced book that falls between two stools, for the novice too many species included and an unhelpful split by habitat. It is also a pity that a few photographs are mislabelled or misidentified. For the more experienced birder, no real feel for species status or identification criteria is available, and no sense that the authors are sharing their specific knowledge of birds in Qatar.

Jamie Buchan & Michael Grunwell