This is the first guide to attempt to cover the whole Palearctic region and it was with some excitement that I awaited my review copy. After a brief introduction and short sections on the geographic area and species covered, nomenclature, identification and bird topography comes the real substance of the book – 80 colour plates with relevant texts facing each species. Distribution maps occupy the remaining 48 pages.

There is still much debate over the southern boundary of the Palearctic region and in this book the author follows the boundary adopted by Beaman, thus including the whole of Arabia. I found the inclusion of all American vagrants a little odd, especially as some of this space could have been utilised more usefully to give further details on some eastern species for which there is currently little available information in field-guide format.

The approach to taxonomy is very conservative. Despite the author’s claim that most major subspecies are illustrated, there is, for example, no mention of races of Subalpine Warbler Sylvia cantillon or Orphean Warbler S. Hortensis, even though the latter is now generally recognised as comprising two different species. On the flip side, however, the wagtail plates usefully illustrate the head and upper bodies of males of ten subspecies of flava and eight subspecies of alba wagtail.

The plates are inevitably a little crowded and are limited to adult plumages only. They are of variable quality but many of them are very good. I particularly enjoyed drooling over the chats and thrushes (Turdidae) but was disappointed by the Phylloscopus warblers. Sadly, I suspect that the author has been let down by the colour reproduction in places.

The text is quite limited and comprises short sections on field notes, song/call and habitat. The field-notes section is particularly disappointing and really lets the book down. Although space is tight, many texts will offer little or no help in trying to resolve an identification. For example, we are told that Sky Lark Alauda arvensis forms winter flocks while Oriental Lark A. gulgula is more secretive than Sky Lark; and that Blyth's Pipit Anthus godlewskii is very similar to Richard’s Pipit A. richardi but walks a little bit more horizontally. This space could have been used so much more effectively, even if it gave just one useful pointer on how to separate species from their close congeners. In essence, the reader is left to try and distinguish structural or plumage differences solely from the plates. When it comes to more complex groups, e.g. Bradypterus, Cettia or Phylloscopus warblers, the weakness of the guide becomes readily apparent.

This is a surprisingly slim volume for subject matter covered, and the cost. In my view, a real opportunity has been lost. Even at double the size it would have been small enough to take into the field and yet so much more space would have been available for illustrating important juvenile/first-winter plumages and delivering more useful identification texts.

Notwithstanding these comments, it is a considerable achievement for one man to have produced both the texts and illustrations and Norman Arlott should be congratulated on this.

If you enjoy browsing through books to remind yourself of what you have seen, or dream of what you might one day get the opportunity to see, then you will undoubtedly enjoy this book which brings so many of these species together for the first time. If, on the other hand, you are hoping to use this book as a field guide, then I am afraid it would fall woefully short in much of the region that it covers.

I love to browse and dream, however, so I for one look forward to the accompanying volume on non-passerines, which is apparently in production.

Pete Cambridge

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Reviews

COLLINS FIELD GUIDE – BIRDS OF THE PALEARCTIC: PASSERINES

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BIRDS IN A VILLAGE: A CENTURY ON

W. H. Hudson, who died in 1922 at the age of 80, was a prolific author who wrote much about the English countryside and its birds. His many books include Birds in a Village (1893), to which Brian Clews decided to add what he terms ‘response chapters’ to reflect the changes that have taken place in the same village during the intervening century. This is an interesting idea, though one that fails to work, in my opinion, because the so-called ‘response chapters’ do not match the quality of Hudson’s original text. The employment of a good copy-editor would have eliminated many of the obvious irritations, such as the unlikely statement that ‘dozens of people had feinted’ [sic] in the heat of a recent summer at the Wimbledon tennis tournament.

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Paul Harvey
MANX BIRD ATLAS: AN ATLAS OF BREEDING AND WINTERING BIRDS ON THE ISLE OF MAN APRIL 1998 TO MARCH 2003

With fieldwork for the BTO/IWC/SOC Bird Atlas getting underway this winter and a number of local atlas projects starting up in tandem with the UK and Ireland project, there will be a great deal of interest in the publication of this atlas of the birds of the Isle of Man. In the preface, David Gibbons, organiser and principal author of the last BTO/IWC/SOC Atlas, declares that ‘there is little doubt that this project is fast becoming a world leader among bird monitoring and survey work of this kind.’ Anyone taking a quick glance through this heavy tome and seeing the detailed and professionally presented colour maps will soon be of the same opinion. This is clearly a production that many will be aspiring to for many years to come.

This goal may, however, be beyond the reach of many. The Manx Bird Atlas project is unusual for our islands in that it was run almost completely by paid surveyors working to a very precise methodology and organised to an almost military precision. For instance, all breeding season fieldwork was conducted only on dry mornings during the period from just after dawn until mid morning, and only on days when wind speed was below force 4 on the Beaufort Scale. Visits were timed (two hours) and restricted to single 1-km squares. The location and activity of every bird using the square was mapped and the data transcribed onto a new map after the fieldwork before being entered onto a computer database which included rigorous checks to ensure that nothing was lost. Colony counts were made separately so as not to compromise the optimum time of day for fieldwork. Additional data on scarcer species were also taken account of to ensure the most accurate distribution maps. With conditions such as this, the organisers were as sure as they could be that the best total number of each species found was compiled and, most importantly, the methods are so robust that they can be repeated in the future and produce highly comparable results. Oh for such conditions for most local and national atlas projects!

But what of the actual book? After introductory chapters, which include details of habitats on the island, the history of the project and the methods used, the bulk of the book consists of the expected species accounts. These follow the usual standard atlas format, with an attractive line-drawing above detailed text and a fact box indicating seasonal presence, population estimates and statistics, plus (for most breeding species) a pair of maps comparing distribution at 5-km square level in 1977–81, taken from the Birds of the Isle of Man (Cullen & Jennings 1986), with that in the present survey. A page of between one and four maps faces the text. I was pleased to see that the text follows a standard sequence, which usually includes a description of the maps, naming sites and classification they cannot be faulted. For many species there are four maps. One or two distribution maps use coloured squares at the 1-km level to show summer and/or winter presence; the summer maps also use coloured dots on top of the squares to indicate breeding status (possible, probable or proved breeding). Then there are usually one or two abundance maps using coloured shading of the type we are now familiar with from the BTO/IWC/SOC 1988–91 Breeding Atlas, but here of course the scale is much finer allowing great detail. The flat low-lying plain in the north of the island consistently holds the greater abundance of many species. The colours chosen are pleasing to the eye but some may cause problems for colour-blind readers. All maps have a background showing the relief of the island, which is very helpful in interpreting the results.

This new atlas offers a definitive and reliable statement on the breeding and wintering avifauna of the Isle of Man. It is not cheap, but I would nevertheless recommend it to anyone familiar with the Isle of Man and also to those interested in local atlases. There is much to be learnt from this book.

Mark Holling

WHERE TO WATCH MAMMALS IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND

Not being very knowledgeable about mammals, I looked at this little book with interest. Its format will be familiar to those readers who know the regional bird equivalents, beginning with an introductory section that covers aspects such as Conservation, Mammals & the Law, and Equipment. I found the section on Fieldcraft interesting. In an era when, for many birders, this seems to comprise remembering to put the pager in your pocket and the ‘sat-nav’ in the car, and then looking for a crowd of telescopes all pointing in one direction, I read sections on Patience and Stealth with some-
Reviews

The Lapwing
By Michael Shrubb.

My goodness, I never thought that I would be reviewing a book on the (Northern) Lapwing Vanellus vanellus more than 50 years after I wrote my own (The Lapwing in Britain, Brown & Sons, London & Hull, 1953). Mine remained the standard work up to at least 1987 (Peter Weaver, The Lapwing, Shire Natural History Series, Aylesbury) but it is now superseded.

A good athlete must feel a twinge of regret when he sees his national record broken, but at the same time he rejoices at the progress of his sport. And so it is here: I congratulate Mike Shrubb and his publishers on a superb book.

Detailed and thorough are words that spring to mind, yet it is very readable, especially in those sections where the author draws upon his lifetime experience as a farmer. He has a real affection for his Lapwings, and it shines through. The illustrations – mostly by Robert Gillmor – complement the text and are a delight in themselves.

On one point of detail, I’m sorry that very little attention is given to the Lapwing’s remarkable adaptation of assembling on industrial rooftops, for this is how thousands of them now spend half their time for half the year across much of northern England. People are apt to call these assemblages ‘roosts’, which is not exactly true: they are refuges where the birds while away their time during the day, as gulls (Laridae) also often do. The roofs have to a large extent replaced reservoir edges, a habitat now almost lost to Lapwings through increased use for public recreation.

A great deal of fieldwork is reported on, both in Britain and abroad, some of it completely new to me; for example, the revelation that Lapwings are by no means always monogamous. Indoors, so to speak, I have waited for years to see someone analyse the BTO nest record cards for Lapwing. Mike Shrubb has now done that, with rewarding results.

I hesitate to mention the book’s price, but £40.00 was a full month’s wages in my day and it still seems rather high. I do also have to say that this is not a book for the beginner, though for serious ornithologists and, of course, for Lapwing enthusiasts, it is absolutely essential.

K. G. Spencer

Arctic Flight: Adventures Amongst Northern Birds
By James McCallum.

James McCallum is a Norfolk-based wildlife artist whose work is already known and appreciated by many who have seen his several books and exhibited work. His work is almost exclusively executed in the field in a quick-fire manner and, unsurprisingly, he lists Eric Ennion and John Busby, among others, as influences on his style. Earlier in his career, his creative work occurred in tandem with wardening duties on Blakeney Point, and his ability to work outside oblivious of time and discomfort has held him in good stead for the adventures disclosed in this book.

Like very many of us, he has been fascinated by the wintering and passage waders and wildfowl of East Anglia and dreamed of joining them on their summer sojourn. Like very few of us, he made that leap through a series of fortunate chance meetings to do just that. Not once but four times he has ‘summered’ in the north, with prolonged trips in Scandinavia, Alaska and eastern Siberia, sometimes joining research teams, where by virtue of almost continuous daylight he combined research with drawing (when did he sleep?).

Each trip account begins with an introduction by a companion or ‘trip fixer’, who explains the circumstances of each expedition; all of these allude to the intensiveness of James at work, and the surprise at both volume and quality of the work produced in the harsh and testing conditions of the Arctic. James’s own texts then explain more...
Many of you will know Mike Warren from the British Birdwatching Fair, cutting a fine artistic figure alongside his easel, pondering the next brushstroke on his latest painting – always willing to chat about birds, painting and the current predicament of a dodgy Midlands football team. Many more of you will also know of him through his beautifully intricate paintings that graced some of the covers of Birds magazine between the 1960s and 1980s and an article in British Birds by Nicholas Hammond – in the good old days when the RSPB magazine had room for both artwork and photos.

An artist who birds or is it a birder who paints? Let’s settle for bird artist. Warren has many times had to cut into the right pages to see if your favourite bird has been captured in watercolour. It is almost impossible to select the painting I would most like to see on my wall, because my fancy changes with each browse through the book – though I do fall for the Wrens Troglodytes troglodytes on pages 114–115 and the Goldcrests Regulus regulus on page 140 every time.

OK, it’s a fair cop, I’m an unashamed fan; but then it is very difficult not to be. Mike is a master of composition and design, but the skill that puts his paintings onto another level is his ability to place the bird naturally into its habitat, without it looking as if it was shoehorned in – check the Sedge Warbler Acrocephalus schoenobaenus on page 135 and Red-necked Phalarope Phalaropus lobatus on page 77 in this respect. His texts are straightforward and as a rule he lets the pictures do the talking, but I did enjoy the little dig at BBRC for not approving one of his records (a White-billed Diver Gavia adamsii on Anglesey in 1963)!

Again, those at Langford Press deserve to have praise heaped upon them for maintaining the high standard they have set with this series of sumptuous volumes. Judging by their latest catalogue, I won’t be stuck for things to put on my next Christmas list.

Dan Powell
Chapter 4 introduces Scilly’s naturalists, from the generalist Robert Heath in the mid 1800s to the specialists of today. We learn that there have been many interesting characters involved over the years, who between them have amassed and published a wealth of information about the natural history of Scilly.

The next three chapters focus on the islands: St Mary’s; the so-called ‘off-islands’ – the four remaining inhabited islands of St Agnes, Bryher, Tresco and St Martin’s; and the uninhabited islands. These chapters provide a general introduction to the complexion of the islands, for the most part in terms of habitats and the main flora and fauna to be found, and scenes and habitats to be witnessed. By this stage of the book, the reader has developed a sound understanding of many facets of Scilly that facilitate a full appreciation of the details of flora and fauna to come.

Six subsequent chapters are systematic in their coverage of the main types of habitat in Scilly and their flora, the wildlife that frequents these habitats, and key issues that affect habitat and wildlife alike. For example, the islands’ economy has drastically influenced the habitats, and the bulb fields, dominant for many years, have provided ideal conditions for the growth of introduced species. She is pragmatic rather than pessimistic about the future, understanding that change is inevitable and that there have been losses (e.g. the recent loss of Roseate Tern Sterna dougallii as a breeding species) and there may be gains, albeit by way of introductions. As the author recognises, “there is still a community of people on the islands and none of them would appreciate living in a museum.”

The 209 illustrations are spread evenly throughout the volume, exactly where needed and not clustered in the middle or at the end. This must increase production costs and Collins is to be applauded for bucking the publishing trend of profit maximisation by producing a book within the spirit declared for the New Naturalist series. Depicting classic scenes, landscape, flora and fauna, there are many contributions by well-known bird and wildlife photographers (although the author’s own material is of equal standing), while artwork of wildlife by celebrated Scilly veterans Ian Wallace and Ren Hathway animates what is already a lively text.

Come on – treat yourself to this wonderful book about the natural history of the Isles of Scilly. The book wraps up Scilly between its covers and permits you to take the islands back home, where you can open the covers and release and experience the wonders of Scilly in your living room again and again.

Robert L. Flood

British Birds 101 • January 2008 • 43–47

SOUNDS OF THE BRITISH COASTLINE: A JOURNEY IN SOUND ALONG THE SHORES OF BRITAIN

RSPB CHILDREN’S GUIDE TO BIRDWATCHING – 2ND EDN

A PHOTOGRAPHIC GUIDE TO BIRDS OF PERU

RSPB POCKET GUIDE TO BRITISH BIRDS

WHERE TO WATCH BIRDS IN THE WEST MIDLANDS – 3RD EDN

ALSO RECEIVED

Reviews