

Reviews

**HORACE ALEXANDER:
1889 TO 1989.
BIRDS AND BINOCULARS.**

By J. Duncan Wood.
Illustrations by Robert Gillmor
and Ian Wallace. William
Sessions, York, 2003. 191 pages.
ISBN 1-85072-289-7.
Paperback, £12.00.

Horace Alexander, a fine Quaker and humanist, would not have wanted a monument. But now he has two. The first is his own memoir, *Seventy Years of Birdwatching* (Poyser, 1974), a remarkable record of a lifetime's interest in birds, and bird recording. This new book, beautifully written by Duncan Wood, is a worthy second monument.

I first met Horace Alexander ('H. G.') in the late 1940s, when he was President of the Birmingham Bird Club, and renewed that acquaintance in the 1980s in Philadelphia. Duncan Wood, who knew H. G. far better than I, has

produced a thorough and sensitive biography of a man who can be regarded as one of the founding fathers of modern British ornithology. In the Foreword, Wood reminds us that H. G. maintained 'active involvement in two rather different concerns, the promotion of peace and the study of birds'. Alexander was a seminal figure in the history of modern India, on 'My dear Horace' terms with Mahatma Gandhi. A chapter in this book covers H. G.'s peace work in the subcontinent. Most of the book is about birds, about the rise of field ornithology, about ornithology before and after the Second World War, about modern times, about the ornithologist as observer, and the ornithologist as recorder.

This book has something for everyone interested in birds, in birdwatching and its modern development. H. G. and his brother W. B., Harry Witherby, Norman Ticehurst, Bernard Tucker, T. A. Coward and Max Nicholson were all friends, and present at the birth of *British Birds*, of the Witherby Handbook, of the BTO, and the Edward Grey Institute in Oxford. H. G. was Chairman of the BOU Rarities Committee, and responsible for the publication of *The Status of Birds in Britain and Ireland* (BOU, 1971).

H. G.'s work on



Michael Thomas

309. Horace Alexander, Philadelphia, USA, 1980.

Water Pipits *Anthus spinoletta*, Willow Tits *Parus montanus* and the genus *Phylloscopus* was pioneering, and is well covered in this book. H. G.'s real monument, however, is his work on his local patches (several in England, and in the USA, to which he retired) and his study of distribution. Armed with six-inch Ordnance Survey maps, he was the founder of bird mapping techniques.

Horace Alexander was an extraordinary human being, and a model for all birdwatchers. This splendid book, which includes appendices covering H. G.'s correspondence, extracts from his field notebooks, and his bird drawings, allows us all to share in a remarkable life.

Michael Thomas



Horace Alexander

Fig. 1. Painting of Kentish Plover; 1907.

BIRDS BY BEHAVIOUR

By Dominic Couzens,
illustrated by Philip Snow,
Tony Disley, David Nurney,
Richard Jarvis and
Michael Webb.
Collins, London, 2003. 256
pages; colour illustrations.
ISBN 0-00-711549-0.
Paperback, £16.99.

To quote from the introductory pages '*Birds by Behaviour* differs from other field guides in one very important respect. It ditches all discussion of plumage and plumage patterns and concentrates instead on shape, behaviour and ecology.' In other words, this guide deals with jizz.

The captions and annotations to the copious all-colour paintings form the entire text. Not only are

there no plumage details, but there are no distribution maps, and no mention of voice. *Birds by Behaviour* is, therefore, not a primary identification guide, but rather a companion to a more traditional field guide. The user is advised in the introduction to 'check the plates carefully to find out all the information given for a particular bird. Many of the plates are very "busy", meaning that some notes

can be fairly hidden away in all corners of the page.' This sums up the main drawback: you have to check the whole page carefully, as information on the same species can occur in several different captions and, unless you know your birds in the first place, it is sometimes difficult to associate the caption with the correct illustration.

Moreover, the only way to find all the information on a bird is to use the index, as a species may occur in more than one place in the book. Sky Lark *Alauda arvensis*, for example, appears under 'Larks, pipits and other small brown birds', 'Seed-eating bird families', 'Larks: song flights and habitats' and 'Larks: other larks', while Common Eider *Somateria mollissima* appears on six different pages, and Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* on no fewer than eight pages! There are also 12 'General comparison' pages, e.g.

'Birds swimming on the sea', 'Birds flying over the sea', and 'Aerial birds'; these are scattered throughout the book so are not easy to find.

Nevertheless, given the subjective nature of the jizz approach, much of the text is, in fact, very good, and captures succinctly the feeling of a species, e.g. Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus* is 'pointed at all angles'. The illustrations, too, are mostly useful and pleasing, varying in quality from excellent to average. It is unfortunate that none of the illustrations are attributed to artist, so we are left to guess which of the five artists – a mixture of well- and lesser-known names – painted what.

I looked out my copy of *Birds by Character: the field guide to jizz identification* (by Rob Hume, illustrated by Ian Wallace, Darren Rees, John Busby and Peter Partington; Papermac, 1990), which covers the

same subject, but in a different format. I was impressed afresh by how good it is! Not only is all the information on each species presented together, with two or three species per page, but the illustrations are all excellent, and the text laid out as a series of bullet points which time and again capture the essence of a species. For me, *Birds by Behaviour* suffers by comparison with *Birds by Character*.

There is undoubtedly a good idea here, but I feel the end result is not entirely successful. Perhaps it is overambitious and tries to cover too much ground by including all the breeding birds of Europe east to European Russia and most regular visitors. Stripped down to a guide covering just garden birds and commoner species, and reorganised to allow better retrieval, it could be excellent for the popular market.

Ian Dawson

TRACKS & SIGNS OF THE BIRDS OF BRITAIN & EUROPE

By Roy Brown, John Ferguson, Michael Lawrence and David Lees, illustrated by David Quinn, Chris Shields and Michael Lawrence.
2nd edition. Christopher Helm, A&C Black, London, 2003. 333 pages; 61 colour plates; numerous colour photographs; colour and line-drawings; maps.
ISBN 0-7136-5382-5.
Paperback, £24.99.

The second edition of this well-known guide is almost exactly 100 pages longer than the first (reviewed *Brit. Birds* 80: 443-444), and greater use of colour and crisper design has resulted in a more attractive and user-friendly product. The content of the new edition remains roughly the same as that of the original, but the omission of the checklist of species, which included the scientific names of birds covered, may well be a mistake as they are not

included elsewhere. The book is well illustrated throughout, not only with photographs but also with superb colour plates and admirably clear line-drawings.

The opening chapter outlines the structure of the book, while the second explains how to record, collect and analyse information. The remaining seven chapters deal with specific topics; of these 'Nests and roosts' is, in my view, the weakest and could have been omitted in favour of expanding other sections. The information it presents on nests and nest-sites is very basic and, despite the title, roost sites are not discussed. The decision to use Pallas's Fish Eagle *Haliaeetus leucorhynchus* as one of the examples in this chapter seems an odd choice, given the stated geographical limits of the guide.

The sections entitled 'Tracks and trails', 'Feeding and behavioural signs', 'Pellets', 'Droppings', 'Feathers' and 'Skulls' all contain much to interest and inform, most of which is unavailable elsewhere. I found the detail presented on tracks very impressive, but strongly suspect that most people will buy

this volume for the wealth of information on skulls (over 200 examples are illustrated) and, especially, feathers. Numerous colour plates illustrate this last subject and are sufficient reason by themselves to own this book.

A list of addresses of European bird protection and study organisations followed by a bibliography concludes the guide. Unfortunately, neither appears to have been updated since the first edition in 1987. For example, according to the address list, the BTO is still based at Beech Grove, West Germany remains a political entity, while Beaman & Madge (1998, *The Handbook of Bird Identification*) is noted in the text but omitted from the bibliography. It is a pity that not a single eastern European ornithological organisation is listed.

Notwithstanding a few nit-picks, this unique volume deserves a place on the bookshelves of anyone with an interest in birds and the countryside. Even if you own the original edition, the improvements to this one make it worth buying.

Pete Combridge

**FLIGHT IDENTIFICATION
OF EUROPEAN SEABIRDS**

By Anders Blomdahl, Bertil Breife, Niklas Holmström.
Christopher Helm, A&C
Black, London, 2003. 374
pages; 690 colour plates.
ISBN 0-7136-6020-1.
Paperback, £35.00.

I borrowed Anthony McGeehan's copy of *Sjöfågeln: fältbestämning av sträckande sjöfaglar* a few years ago, and he was lucky to get it back! Written in Swedish, it is an excellent collection of black-and-white photographs of seabirds in flight, and a great resource. Bertil Breife and Niklas Holmström were two of its authors, and now they have teamed up with Anders Blomdahl to produce the successor to that book, this time with colour photographs and written in English. Having coveted the first book, I certainly looked forward to the second.

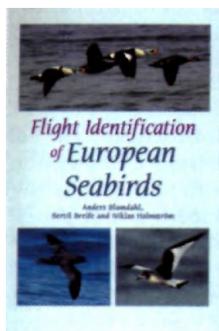
The book has a soft, laminated cover designed for use in the field, although I would be too scared of getting the pages wet to take it out. It covers the expected divers *Gavia*, grebes (Podicipedidae), tubenoses and allies (Procellariidae), gannets (Sulidae), cormorants (Phalacrocoracidae), skuas (Stercorariidae), gulls (Laridae), terns (Sternidae) and auks (Alcidae). It differs from those other two seabird photographic guides, *Photographic Handbook of the Seabirds of the World* (Enticott & Tipling 1997) and *Seabirds of the World: A Photographic Guide* (Harrison 1987) in that wildfowl (Anatidae) are also covered in detail.

A helpful introduction includes basic aspects of identifying seabirds and a very useful table of seawatching sites across western Europe. Each group of species is preceded by a general overview of the key features of the group, while each species account is subdivided into several sections including size, silhouette, flight and flocking, plumage, and – where relevant – subspecies. The text is accompa-

nied by a variety of flight shots illustrating various aspects of the birds' appearance.

Seawatching is a unique discipline. Precise plumage details often take second place behind jizz, subjective impressions and briefly seen plumage 'clues'. The tricky issues involved are well played out in, for example, the account of a possible Herald Petrel *Pterodroma arminjoniana* off Dungeness, Kent (*Brit. Birds* 95: 156-165). So how well does this book communicate these things?

The initial impression is of a fantastic collection of colour photographs, especially of wildfowl in flight. The text is fairly simple and full of information, with quite a few hints and tips which were new to me. The enthusiasm for and knowledge of seabirds which the



authors possess is clear throughout. I decided quickly that this would be a useful reference book. My particular favourites are the information on flock shapes and individual silhouettes of the wildfowl, and the photos of the 'darker'-rumped Leach's Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma leucorhoa* and the flock of first-summer Ross's Gulls *Rhodostethia rosea*.

Having said all that, I was ultimately a little disappointed. I wonder if many will miss the vital tips because they are buried away in the text. Moreover, photographs alone cannot convey the unique skills which seawatchers typically develop and have to sharpen continually. Take, for example, Sabine's Gulls *Larus sabini*. The quickest way to pick them up is on their (almost) unique flight action, most

often confused with Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*. Rudimentary ageing of Sabine's Gulls for me is: white collar = adults... no white collar and shorter-looking tails = juveniles. The rest is usually irrelevant unless the birds are very close. I had hoped for something like a series of vivid sketches to illustrate flight action, flight path and the little plumage clues which are just visible at long range, along with pointers and a short, pithy text. I could easily imagine a similar treatment for the skuas and the *Pterodroma* petrels. It is extremely difficult to convey in photographs alone the 'seawatch experience' and appearance of these birds. I wondered why some species – such as Bar-headed *Anser indicus* and Egyptian Geese *A. aegyptiacus* – were included. Pacific Diver *G. pacifica* is covered as a possible vagrant, but who would claim one on a European seawatch? Yet more pertinent vagrants, such as Capped *P. hasitata* and Herald Petrels, Yellow-nosed *Thalassarche chlororhynchos* and Wandering Albatrosses *Diomedea exulans*, are missing, and there is nothing at all on that prized seabird, the Grey Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicarius*.

This could have been an opportunity to be at the forefront of new identification challenges such as Cory's *Calonectris diomedea* versus 'Scopoli's' Shearwater *C. d. borealis* and the tricky black-and-white shearwaters. So a comment is made on the characteristic 'head-lifting' of Little Shearwater *Puffinus assimilis*, when in fact it is also a normal feature of Levantine Shearwater *P. yelkouan* (and illustrated in the published photos!). The photographs are mostly helpfully and accurately labelled, though the 'first-calendar-year' *Larus michahellis* from Romania is, in fact, a first-year *L. cachinanns*.

So, we do not yet have the definitive European seabird guide. Nevertheless, I do want to emphasise that this is a great collection of photos with a useful text, and is a resource well worth having.

Martin Garner

**ERIC ENNION:
A LIFE OF BIRDS**

Edited by Bob Walthew.
Lavenham Press, Lavenham,
2003. 80 pages; 83 paintings.
ISBN 0-9526-2364-X.
Hardback, £25.00.

Love him or hate him – and sadly some still doubt his great talent – Eric Ennion was one of the true originals of twentieth-century bird art. His particular genius was for capturing the free movement, dynamism and individuality of his subjects. As in real life, they are always doing something, which makes his paintings the antithesis of field guide plates: the birds are as they *are*; not as they should be.

Some people will have encountered his work only in the worst of all contexts. In the 1960s, the oil

company Shell commissioned 81 paintings to appear in James Fisher's scholarly *tour de force*, the classically misnamed *Shell Book of Birds* (1966). In the end, they only used 48 of the complete set and these appear at a size little bigger than a large postage stamp, with terrible colour reproduction. The present volume has brought them all together for the first time, at or close to their original size. They are a beautiful sample of the master's work when Ennion was, in the words of Robert Gillmor's introductory essay, 'at the height of his powers as an artist'.

While they are representative of his talent, they are not – even his most ardent admirer must acknowledge – his best work. To use a somewhat elevated comparison, Ennion was the Leonardo da Vinci of bird art – a multi-talented

man tempted from his main calling by a crowd of other interests. In his long life he was a founder of the Field Studies Council's centre at Flatford Mill, the warden of a bird observatory, a keen ringer, a student of bird migration, an art teacher and a writer. Fortunately, this book reflects the other sides of Ennion by pulling together a selection of his articles from the 1950s and 60s. As with other bird painters, the laser-eye and sense of overall design were easily transferred to the written word and he produced natural-history essays of great insight and originality. The new book therefore delivers a double helping of the great man's gifts, and I would heartily recommend it both to long-time admirers and to any who may never even have heard of him.

Mark Cocker

**A CONCISE HISTORY OF
ORNITHOLOGY**

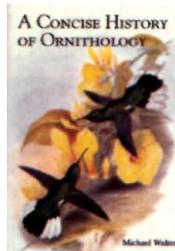
By Michael Walters.
Christopher Helm, A&C
Black, London, 2003. 166
pages of narrative; 80 pages of
appendices.
ISBN 1-873403-97-6.
Hardback, £30.00.

This deceptively slim book contains about 95,000 words on the lives and works of the founding figures of ornithology. Over 350 people from all the continents are credited with some part in the development of the science and many of the 60 or so major contributors feature in 90 fascinating black-and-white illustrations. The bibliography lists about 450 references, dated from 500 BC to AD 2000. The appendices present 30 systematic orders constructed during the long ascent to an intelligent classification of birds.

Having recently become fascinated by the progenitors of my chosen hobby-cum-science, I opened the book with great expectation but, about 40 pages in, I faltered. The interruption to my enjoyment and learning was no

fault of the author; it was entirely due to the small typeface used. This has allowed 800 words per page, but no easy track from line to line. I solved the problem by changing up to my painting glasses and ploughed on.

As the passages on early British ornithologists came and went, I felt some disappointment at the often brief treatment (or exclusion) of personal heroes, but full compensation for this came in a growing



understanding of the contributions of the ornithologists of other countries. Some sense of the international web of ancient ornithology is available in other histories but, laudably, Michael Walters has defined many more linking strands. I read on with renewed interest, relishing particularly the occasional tales and snippets of verbatim exchanges.

Actually, I could have done with more of these to lighten what was increasingly apparent as the book's main theme, the 'critical path' of avian systematics, also exhibited in the appendices but there with virtually no explanatory comment.

Having disclaimed any personal attempt to discuss its more recent developments, the author (or publisher?) nevertheless asked John Coulson to add a chapter on the ornithology of the twentieth century. In this, I found some fuller recognition of the diversification of its current disciplines, and even some asides on birdwatchers and their politics, but the abrupt change of style made for an awkward ending. People became many fewer; subjects radiated. I longed for some last resolving comments on the whole saga, but there was none.

In the case of the loyal *BB* reader and like souls, aged 50 years and counting, I recommend that this book goes straight onto their historical shelf. I also wish for it to catch the attention of those who watch birds through the current tunnels of attention, but sadly, somehow I doubt that it will.

D. I. M. Wallace

Title: Horace and the Bird Publisher: George Allen and Unwin Publication Date: 1921 Binding: Hardcover Book Condition: Very Good Dust Jacket Condition: Near Fine Edition: First Edition. Top Search Results from the AbeBooks Marketplace. Stock Image. 1. Horace Alexander 1889-1989: Birds and Binoculars. Wood, J.Duncan. ISBN 10: 1850722897 ISBN 13: 9781850722892.Â 6. Horace Alexander 1889 to 1989 Birds and Binoculars. J Duncan Wood. Published by William Sessions (2003). Horace Gundry Alexander (18 April 1889 â€“ 30 September 1989) was a British Quaker teacher and writer, pacifist and ornithologist. He was the youngest of four sons of Joseph Gundry Alexander (1848â€“1918), two other sons being the ornithologists Wilfred Backhouse Alexander and Christopher James Alexander (1887â€“1917). He was a friend of Mahatma Gandhi. Horace was born on 18 April 1889 at Croydon, England. His father Joseph Gundry Alexander (1848â€“1918) was an eminent lawyer, who had worked to suppress the