

REVIEWS

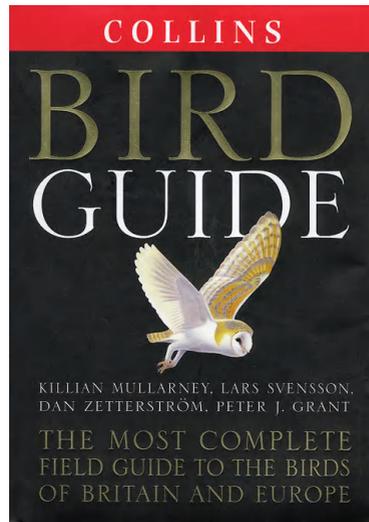
Collins Bird Guide

By Lars Svensson & Peter J. Grant;
illustrated by Killian Mullarney & Dan
Zetterström; translated by David Christie.
HarperCollins, London, 1999.
400 pages; 3,500 paintings; about
700 distribution maps.
ISBN 0-00-219728-6.
Hardback £24.99.

Well, this is the one that we have all been waiting for. The idea for 'the perfect field guide' was conceived in August 1982 by Svensson, Grant and Mullarney during a meeting in Sweden. I doubt whether they thought then that the egg would take 17 years to hatch, and, regrettably, Peter Grant never lived to see the end result, having died of cancer in 1990.

So, what is different about this, yet another guide to European birds?

The answer lies in its thoroughness and accuracy. All three originators are ornithological heavyweights and they have incorporated into the guide the remarkable advances in bird identification made during the last 25 years. As is to be expected of Grant and Svensson, the text is extremely comprehensive, and I was particularly impressed with the sections on voice, which are refreshingly thorough. Despite the field-guide style, Svensson has managed to include some evocative flashes of inspiration, such as the comparison of the aerial acrobatics of Red-billed Chough *Pyrhacorax pyrrhacorax* to 'an air-show pilot in an old biplane'. On the negative side, the cramming of 722 species into 400 pages has required the use of a very small typeface, whilst the transcriptions of some vocalisations will not always be easily understood by English-speaking readers; for example, would you identify 'silt sült silt silt...' as the song of the Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*?



The illustrations are largely excellent and are refreshingly lifelike, given that they had to be painted in a rather functional style. Not surprisingly, the task of painting 3,500 birds proved too much for just one artist, so, in 1991, Dan Zetterström stepped in to join Killian Mullarney as the final member of 'the Fab Four'. What is amazing is that the two artists' styles are so similar and there is thus a remarkable uniformity to the book (with the exception of two plates of North American passerine vagrants by Larry McQueen, which are painted more 'loosely'). One aspect of the illustrations which I particularly like is the annotations highlighting significant plumage features.

So, what are the negative points? I can see little value in nit-picking at such a substantial and comprehensive body of work, so I shall confine my criticism to two aspects. The first is the use of English names. Attempts to standardise these have met with some difficulties, so the authors were probably in a no-win situation, but what we have in this book is an unsatisfactory compromise, plus a few innovations, such as Parasitic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus*, Pallas's Gull *Larus ichthyæetus*, Persian Wheatear *Oenanthe xanthopyrmyna* and Hill Sparrow *Carpospiza brachydactyla* (Arctic Skua, Great Black-headed Gull, Red-tailed Wheatear and Pale Rock

Sparrow to you and me). I would have preferred them in Swedish!

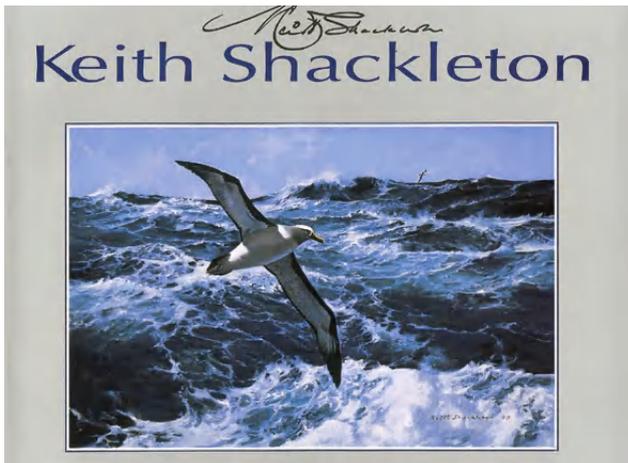
The other slightly puzzling point is the omission of some obvious plumages of common birds. For example, I was surprised by the lack of a summer female Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* or a first-winter male Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis*, and even more baffling is the lack of some juvenile plumages, particularly those of most of the chats, wheatears and thrushes. For instance, we have five illustrations of Belted Kingfisher *Ceryle alcyon*, but none of juvenile Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*.

Five colleagues and I recently 'road-tested' this guide during a trip to Spain,

and we were all very impressed. Time and again, the point that we needed to check was either illustrated or mentioned in the text or both, and, what is more, we each quite often found ourselves saying 'Well, I didn't know that.'

Given that the birds of our region are among the most intensively studied in the World, this book surely has to be the best bird guide ever produced? The answer to the question 'Is it perfect?' is, of course, 'No', but I can not see its being bettered. This is an exceptional book, which sets a very high standard for the new millennium.

KEITH VINICOMBE



Keith Shackleton: an autobiography in paintings

By Keith Shackleton.

Swan Hill Press, Shrewsbury, 1998.

144 pages.

ISBN 1-84037-014-9. £35.00.

Keith Shackleton's paintings never fail to impress. Looking through this collection of 80 pictures, as a fan of 30 years, I am still stunned most by the sheer impact of his beautifully composed Antarctic scenes, the single albatross drifting over magical icebergs and towering seas. But his subjects

are many and varied, from softer English landscapes to ships battling against the elements, and from geese flying over the Andes to African Elephants and Baobab trees.

The pictures were assembled from all corners of the globe for a recent retrospective exhibition of Keith's work to mark his attaining the age of 75 and, as he puts it, 'codgerhood'. The book grew out of this event and he was persuaded to write the

text himself – a happy outcome for the reader, for he writes well.

The introductory chapter traces the course of his full and interesting life, and the paintings, arranged in chronological order, are accompanied by Keith's recollections of events of the time and his musings on the paintings' subjects.

This most comprehensive collection of Shackleton paintings ever published is terrific in itself, but the fascinating and often entertaining text makes an excellent read and reveals a good deal of the man.

Thoroughly recommended!

HILARY BURN

This Birds Wiki article is a stub. Please help Birds Wiki by expanding it. Collins Bird Guide is a field guide to the birds of Europe, North Africa and Middle East. It is considered the most complete guide to the birds of Britain and Europe. It contains over 3500 bird paintings by Killian Mullarney and Dan Zetterstrom and has useful texts and range maps by Lars Svensson. Categories: Stubs. Bird Books. Resources. Community content is available under CC-BY-SA unless otherwise noted.