

Reviews

THE BIRDS OF SUFFOLK

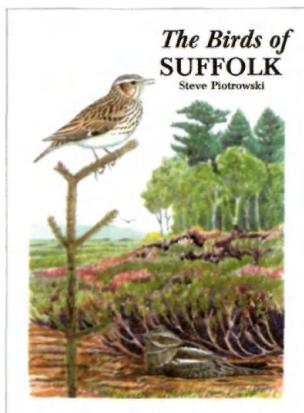
By Steve Piotrowski.

Christopher Helm, A&C Black,
London, 2003. 360 pages;
70 colour photographs;
line-drawings, charts
and distribution maps.
ISBN 1-7136-6354-5.
Hardback, £40.00.

Suffolk has long been recognised as one of the richest and most diverse of the English counties. It is home to perhaps the broadest spectrum of breeding birds (in England), while the winter months bring internationally important numbers of wintering waterfowl and raptors to its coastal wetlands and inland marshes. Consequently, Suffolk's ornithology has been well documented by previous authors, including Ticehurst (1932) and Payn (1973, 1978). Their detailed accounts of the birdlife during their respective periods make fascinating reading, but for the current generation of birders, these older accounts relate to a bygone era – one now lost to the demands of industrial agriculture and to the urban sprawl so prevalent during the last 30 years. The time is ripe for an update and this book meets all expectations.

Indeed, this book establishes a most-important milestone in Suffolk ornithology. Not only does it provide an updated review of all species recorded from Suffolk (in the case of some rarities, up to the end of 2002), but also forms the new baseline by which future changes can be monitored, and provides a valuable insight into developments which have occurred in the recent past.

Introductory chapters discuss Suffolk's many and varied habitats, ranging from the coasts and estuaries, marshes and broads, to the Sandlings and Breckland, rivers, woodland and farmland. Many of the changes affecting the countryside since the account by Payn,



ranging from the intensification of agriculture to the increase in reservoirs and gravel-pits, and their impact on bird populations are discussed. Further chapters consider the effects of weather and climate change. In particular, the emphasis that the impact of an occasional harsh winter has upon bird population levels is discussed, as are the weather conditions causing falls of migrants to the coast.

Other chapters deal with Suffolk's ornithological history, noting particularly the enormous contribution made by C. B. Ticehurst. In addition to older material, the author has drawn upon the vast reservoir of information which has become available in the last 30 years, including published papers and accepted records which have appeared in the *Suffolk Bird Report* since 1950, as well as information from unpublished sources. This has enabled the author to make many fascinating comparisons between current and past trends and fluctuations.

Ringling, migration studies, surveys and conservation have always been important in the county, as they establish important yardsticks by which population trends can be monitored. Their results feature prominently within the systematic list, which is by far the largest section (almost 300 pages) and, perhaps, of most interest to active birders. For most breeding species, a distribution

map, based upon the results of a tetrad survey, summarises the breeding range. Although for the most part these are accurate, in the case of some species, including Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*, they were probably prepared several years ago, and details of recent, and in some cases significant, declines have been omitted. Accounts of the commoner passage migrants and winter visitors are thorough and neatly summarised using bar charts to plot changes in annual abundance.

Treatment of rarities is commendably concise. Almost all accepted records of national rarities are listed individually, although careful scrutiny reveals the inclusion of a tiny minority of records which have not yet been accepted or await submission for assessment. Examples include some early reports of 'Caspian Gull' *Larus (cachinnans) cachinnans* and an 'American Herring Gull' *L. argentatus smithsonianus* in the late 1990s, along with two Radde's Warblers *Phylloscopus schwarzi* and a Dusky Warbler *P. fuscatus* reported in 2002. Their inclusion is doubtless due to the long gestation period of this book and the author's enthusiasm to keep the text updated.

An attractive series of excellent vignettes are liberally scattered throughout the book, in addition to 32 pages of colour photographs, which show a range of important habitats, and a selection of both common and rare species photographed within the county.

The Birds of Suffolk nicely complements the recently published *The Birds of Norfolk*, providing many interesting comparisons and surprising contrasts. If you live in East Anglia, or regularly visit this region, then this book will be a treasure-trove of interesting facts and one which you will regularly want to delve into. A must-have for the bookshelf.

G. J. Jobson

**THE BIRDS OF EXMOOR
AND THE QUANTOCKS**

By David K. Ballance and
B. D. Gibbs. Isabelline Books,
Falmouth, 2003. 205 pages;
colour frontispiece;
32 illustrations; endpaper
maps; folding map.
ISBN 0-9542955-1-X.
Hardback, £35.00.
(ISBN 0-9542955-2-8.
Paperback, £14.95).

Although Exmoor lies across two counties, it is surprising that this is the first major avifauna to cover all of it in one volume. The authors have also chosen to include the Quantocks and the Blackdown Hills, the other major uplands of the region. They claim, with some justification, that no other area of similar size in England and Wales contains such a variety of habitats. The introduction describes these habitats succinctly, and there are quite detailed maps of the topog-

raphy and a gazetteer of principal sites.

A brief history of local ornithology, including ornithologists active since the mid nineteenth century is given. Almost nothing was published about the birds of the area until Cecil Smith's *Birds of Somersetshire*, in 1869. For more recent records, the authors have drawn heavily on annual county bird reports, but have also consulted a wide range of other published sources (fully referenced).

The bulk of the book consists of the species accounts, which vary from a single sentence for accidentals to two pages for Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*. Records up to the end of 2000 are included. Each account is prefaced by a description of the species' past and present status, and arrival and departure dates of migrants are recorded. The accounts are generally full, and cover distribution, timing of breeding, and numbers. The area has seen several local extinctions,

notably of Red *Lagopus lagopus* and Black Grouse *Tetrao tetrix*, and Cirl *Emberiza cirlus* and Corn Buntings *Miliaria calandra*, while numbers of Ring Ouzels *Turdus torquatus* are at a low ebb. Merlins *Falco columbarius* continue to hold on, however, while Dartford Warbler *Sylvia undata* is a notable gain.

The book ends with records of exotics and escapes, and a list of rejected records. The illustrations, by local artists, are of birds in local settings. I found that of Black Grouse at their last Exmoor lek particularly evocative. This book contains a great deal of information and bears comparison with any other local avifauna of which I am familiar, and I recommend it to anyone with an interest in the area. It is available only from Isabelline Books, 8 Woodlane Crescent, Falmouth TR11 4QS; e-mail mikann@beakbook.demon.co.uk

David Warden

**THE ATLAS OF WINTERING
BIRDS IN NORTHUMBRIA**

Edited by John Day and Mike
Hodgson. Northumberland &
Tyneside Bird Club, 2003. 468
pages; 36 colour photographs;
many black-and-white line-
drawings. ISBN 0-9538839-4-9.
Hardback, £42.00.

If you put only one bird book on your Christmas list, make it this one. Northumberland & Tyneside Bird Club's small band of fieldworkers have produced the first wintering atlas for a British county, and it is a worthy companion volume to the *Atlas of Breeding Birds in Northumbria* (Day, Hodgson & Rossiter 1995). Many county bird clubs have now produced breeding atlases, but a winter atlas is a quite different challenge. Breeding birds on territory stay in one place and can be logged during the long days of spring and summer. Mapping the

distribution of bird species in the short winter days is subject to the vagaries of weather and food supply – and the birds move in response to both!

During the three winters of 1996/97 to 1998/99, more than 140 observers made regular two-hour visits to all 1,432 tetrads within the Club's recording area – the county of Northumberland and the districts of Newcastle upon Tyne and North Tyneside. With over 500,000 ha of land and inshore waters, and 100 km of coastline, this is one of the largest ornithological recording areas in England, yet with a low density of observers. Northumberland is particularly important for wintering birds; for example, 2,700 ha of intertidal mudflats on Lindisfarne hold nationally and internationally important populations of waders and wildfowl, notably Svalbard pale-bellied Brent Geese *Branta bernicla hrota*, which peaked at 4,000 during the atlas fieldwork.

A total of 171 species winter

regularly in the region, and the results of this tetrad atlas are compared with the national *Winter Atlas* (Lack 1986), compiled during 1981-84. There are familiar stories of declines among farmland birds such as Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix* between the two recording periods, but perhaps the greatest success story is the remarkable increase of Common Buzzards *Buteo buteo*, which occurred in 67% of 10-km squares compared with just 17% in 1981-84. The atlas quantifies populations of wintering birds and the top ten is dominated by immigrants from northern Europe. Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* at the top is followed by Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*, Rook *Corvus frugilegus*, Common Gull *Larus canus*, Eurasian Jackdaw *C. monedula*, Black-headed Gull *L. ridibundus*, Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*, European Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*, Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* and Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*.

This atlas is produced

extremely professionally, with vignettes of all the wintering species. An invaluable acetate overlay, supplied with the book, maps all the river systems and major settlements in 'Northumbria'. Tetrad maps of all major habitat types are similarly useful,

and photographs of key locations, many of them taken from the air, help the reader visualise the patchwork of upland moorland, lowland farmland and dramatic coastline which makes this region so attractive to wintering birds.

The authors and fieldworkers

should be congratulated for this substantial achievement. The atlas is available, post free, from Mike Hodgson, 31 Uplands, Monkseaton, Whitley Bay, Tyne & Wear NE25 9AG.

Adrian Pitches

**BIRDS, SCYTHES
AND COMBINES:
A HISTORY OF BIRDS AND
AGRICULTURAL CHANGE**

By Michael Shrubbs. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003. 371 pages; maps; tables; graphs; black-and-white illustrations.
ISBN 0-521-81463-4.
Hardback, £35.00.

If you want to know why so many of our farmland bird populations are in a parlous state, this is by far the most informative book available. The author approaches environmental history armed with a lifetime of experience as a working farmer in Sussex and Wales, and a long association with the scientific work of the BTO. In short, he knows what he is talking about, perhaps uniquely so. His aim is to survey the impact of 250 years of constant agricultural change on British farmland birds, under which definition the book includes 99 species with a combined population of over 91 million in the breeding season, and 82 species with a population of 177 million in the winter. The categories are perhaps a little too widely drawn (it is surprising to find Pintail *Anas acuta* and Garganey *A. querquedula* on the list) but this hardly matters when a core 22 species account for over 80% of the breeding population in summer.

The book develops by outlining the course of agrarian change since the eighteenth-century enclosures, in arable and pastoral farming, including, eventually, such familiar themes as the use of pesticides, the removal of hedges and drainage of wet areas, the coming of mechani-

sation and the modernisation of buildings. The basic message is that in economic and social terms the countryside has been in a state of flux since 1750: there is no single 'traditional farming system' to go back to, but rather the past is a kaleidoscope of farming change driven by markets, technology and government policy. For birds, however, these changes tended broadly to cancel one another out until around 1970. Certainly there were losers with the early enclosures, the Great Bustard *Otis tarda* being the obvious example: in Sussex they were common enough to be coursed with hounds before the great changes. But these were more than compensated for by the benefits from high organic inputs into Victorian farming, which encouraged species like Sky Lark *Alauda arvensis* and Corn Bunting *Miliaria calandra*: MacGillivray, in a Hebridean croft during the mid nineteenth century, had Corn Buntings' eggs fried on a shovel for his tea. Every twist in the game produced winners and losers: species like Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* were losers when the main wetlands were drained, but gainers when agricultural depression after 1870 led to the neglect of farm drains and the spread of rushy fields. Linnets *Carduelis cannabina* lost out with the sweeping away of gorse *Ulex* and whins *Genista* on enclosure, but gained again as a result of the multiplication of hedges and weedy root crops. But nothing much fundamental happened to farmland birds as a whole until the second half of the twentieth century.

The most important single critical change was the development of pre-emergent herbicides from the mid 1960s, which within two

decades radically altered the ecology of arable farmland and destroyed both the arable weed flora and the traditional rotation of crops. The way was now clear for autumn-sown monocultures, and the specialisation of farming away from the traditional mixed farm to a cereal east and pastoral west – always a tendency but now a confirmed division. Grassland management, meanwhile, became more intense, with heavy fertiliser applications and EU headage payments. The situation was exacerbated by mechanisation and the abolition of the old stack yards, which had immemorably provided so much winter feed.

Shrubbs writes with clarity (not always helped by his publisher's layout of maps). His argument is concentrated and the detail intense, if also intensely interesting. Who would have guessed, for example, that the fate of the Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus* in the Norfolk Broads was sealed by the coming of the London taxi and the bus, vehicles which did not need the specialist crop of marsh hay that had formerly been sold to fuel the capital's transport?

Not all is doom and gloom. We overcame the loathsome habits of Victorian collecting, though we have not (at least in Scotland) abjured raptor persecution. We largely overcame the use of organochlorines and organophosphates which menaced the bird population in the late 1950s and early 1960s. On the other hand, the message of this book is that the current crisis will not so quickly go away. The organochlorines poisoned people as well as Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus*, so there was a wider social reason to ban them. No-one is going to ban pre-

emergent herbicides or black-bag silage just for the sake of the birds, nor should they try. The EU might eventually back away from headage payment for sheep on the hills; that would help, but it would not put the clock back. Indeed, the message of this book is that the clock never can be put back, even if we know to which point in history we wanted

to turn it. Paying farmers for feeding birds in winter might do something: encouraging headlands and beetle banks by public subsidy might do even more. But the old rotational farming and the mixed farms which for centuries, even more centuries that Michael Shrubbs deals with, supported our farmland birds are gone forever.

We had better get used to it, decide what we want instead, and make that work for the birds. It is hard to be optimistic, but this wonderfully scholarly and perceptive book clears the ground for sharper thought.

Chris Smout

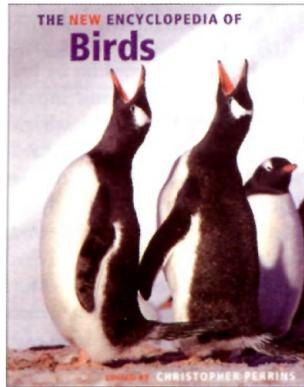
THE NEW ENCYCLOPEDIA OF BIRDS

Edited by Christopher Perrins.
OUP, Oxford, 2003. 656 pages;
colour photographs;
illustrations; maps.
ISBN 0-19-852506-0.
Hardback, £35.00

Usually, when I hear the words 'Encyclopedia of Birds' or, worse still, 'Pictorial Encyclopedia', my heart sinks. I see cheap production, poor photos, awful illustrations, and a naff text by authors no-one has ever heard of – something guaranteed to be remaindered at a cut-price bookshop near you within six months. I have been given a few down the years by well-meaning relatives. Most have, for years, filled much-needed space on the bookshelves without being opened. Who buys this junk? Well, I guess that it is often a 'well-meaning' relative for a member of the family who is 'into birds'.

But this one is different: *honestly!* It is really excellent. Chris Perrins has gathered together a top-class field of authors and illustrators and kept them on a pretty tight rein. The result is an authoritative work, well-structured and packed with accurate and detailed text. The illustrations are generally excellent, although the Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus* must surely be deformed around the bill, and the Common Redshank *Tringa totanus* looks a bit short in the wing. Many of the photographs are as stunning, as we have come to expect in recent years.

The format is fairly straightforward. A few pages of introductory material, entitled 'What is a bird?', give a brief overview of avian evolution, structure and anatomy, and breeding systems. Then it is straight into the main part of the book: a review of all 200 avian families, with coverage ranging from a single page for small groups such as frogmouths (Podargidae), through to six pages for gulls (Laridae), ten for owls (Strigiformes) and 14 for ducks, geese



and swans (Anatidae). There are standard sections on structure, distribution, food, breeding biology, and an especially useful one on conservation, but these are used cleverly to highlight interesting aspects of biology or adaptation relevant to a particular group.

An attractive feature is the inclusion of short (two-page) sections headed 'Photo Story' and 'Special Features'. The former take a series of photos which show, for example, an Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* catching a fish, male Ruffs *Philomachus pugnax* displaying at a lek, and (my favourite) Kakapos

Strigops habroptilus in captivity. The 'Photo Story' sections show important aspects of behaviour, ecology, etc. in stunning detail, with a commentary text from people who really do know what they are talking about. 'Special Features' are varied and, for example, include reports on Great Tit *Parus major* population biology, why an owl looks like an owl, and pigeon (Columbidae) navigation. These are excellent and authoritative, presenting serious science in an accessible and readable way.

So, this book is more than just a series of glossy pictures of pretty birds. The single-volume format cannot compete with the detail of the *Handbook of the Birds of the World*, and many topics are necessarily brief, especially the 'Factfile', a small box for each family which includes the number of species, their global distribution, habitat, plumage, voice, nest, eggs, diet and conservation status, and, bizarrely, an illustration of size against a human silhouette (imagine the Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*, about the size of a big toe!). Who should buy it? It is probably not for 'serious birders', but if you know someone who is 'into birds', then you could do a lot worse than give them this for Christmas. My advice is to leave plenty of time to buy them something else in case you decide to keep it!

Finally, Chris, Don Merton (page 310) is *not* examining a fledgling Kakapo, he's cuddling it; and rightly so: it's a little cracker!

David T. Parkin

Photographs of Birds taken within the county boundary of Suffolk, England. Please ensure the location and date are added to See more. 9951. Welcome one and all, a simple group, only 2 rules, the picture has to have been taken in Suffolk and the location and date should appear somewhere. Feel free to send invites to any one that can add images. Thanks Steve. Discussions. Say Hi. Hi, I'm Steve the moderator, started this group as a Flickr contact had already Steve Plume (find me at www.ukwildlife.me.uk) 61 months ago 4 replies. Ospreys. In recent years I've heard people tell of ospreys stopping off at Needham Market mixed weekages ago 1 replies. Suffolk Birding Delights. Got any tips on locations or tactics that you will In some cases it is uncertain whether a bird inserted in the following list was seen or obtained in Suffolk or in an adjoining county. Thus Yarmouth, partly in Norfolk partly in Suffolk, is frequently the only locality given, or even possible to be given, for a specimen, and in such cases it is in vain attempting to say to which of the counties the bird belongs. A specimen shot on Breydon Water, which divides the counties, must almost necessarily be included in any list either of Suffolk or of Norfolk birds and it is here, in the opinion of a very competent judge, that more rare species have been The birds at the Suffolk farm were slaughtered after some were found to have the H5 strain of avian flu. Officials from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) have found no evidence of bird flu at nearby farms. An investigation is continuing to find the source of the outbreak and the risk of further spread. Public Health England previously said the risk to the public was very low, while the Food Standards Agency said there was no food safety risk as long as poultry products were thoroughly cooked. Image caption The outbreak was discovered at a farm in Athelington, near Eye in Suffolk. The strain at the commercial farm at Athelington, confirmed on 11 December, has been identified