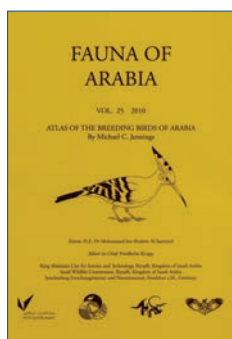


# Reviews



## Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia

By Michael C. Jennings

Fauna of Arabia, Vol. 25, 2010

Hbk, 772pp, 106 colour photos, numerous figures and maps

ISBN 978-3-929907-83-4 Subbuteo code M20733

£102.00 **BB Bookshop price £98.00**

In 1984, Michael Jennings embarked on an ambitious project to map the breeding birds of Arabia. Now, a generation later, the fruits of his labours have been published. The result is a very handsome, large-format book, which maps and describes all 273 species that have been proved to breed within the Arabian Peninsula (including the Socotra archipelago). A further 24 species that are considered possibly to breed, or which may be likely to breed in the future, are also included. No fewer than 20 species (7% of the total) are feral breeders established from introduced birds, while 23 species (8%) are endemic to the region (according to the author's admittedly fairly conservative taxonomy).

The project, affectionately known by the acronym ABBA (probably not a reflection of the author's musical tastes), includes records and field observations from more than 500 contributors, a near-complete search of relevant literature and an extensive trawl through museum specimens. Perhaps most impressively, the author has personally undertaken 40 field surveys, largely at his own expense, to survey poorly recorded areas in the region. The resulting data have been plotted meticulously onto a grid of 1,142 half-degree squares. The coverage achieved is indeed impressive, especially considering the extreme aridity of much of the region and its inevitable remoteness. Only 106 squares (9%) have no records at all, and most of these are in the Empty Quarter, where there are few breeding birds. Coverage was inevitably not uniform, with predictable concentrations of records from the environs of cities and other well-watched areas. Consequently, 30 widely scattered squares each have more than 50 breeding species, but more than 300 squares have fewer than ten individual records throughout the entire atlas period.

The species accounts comprise the bulk of the book and average around two pages per species. Almost all are illustrated with an attractive line-drawing and a large map. Only a few species are

unmapped, and these are escaped or unproven birds. Generally, each species has only a single map, but Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* has four, to demonstrate its rapid spread in the past four decades. The maps are large and very clear, occupying a little over half a page each, with a key to the symbols used in the top-right corner. The dots are sized according to confirmed breeding, probable breeding and presence, with blue symbols for records during the atlas period, and red for pre-1984 records. Instances of breeding in captivity or sheltered conditions are shown where relevant. The texts are thorough and formulaic, summarising the distribution and status in Arabia and including details of breeding ecology where known. A few species have been authored by regional experts, but the majority were compiled by the author.

The extensive introductory material is a major feature of the work. This section, running to more than 120 pages, comprises an introduction and five main chapters. These sections are illustrated with more than 100 colour photographs of birds and habitats, mostly of a very high standard. The Introduction describes the origins and mechanics of the project, including the collection of records and data sources. In chapter 1, we learn about various aspects of Arabian ornithology, including endemism, nomadism and the problems of exotic introductions in Arabia. Chapter 2 covers climate and altitude, geology and topography, vegetation, habitats and zoogeography. Chapter 3 looks at regional bird communities, with Arabia being divided into ten avifaunal regions based on habitat types, topographical features and zoogeographic influences. In Chapter 4, conservation issues are explored, including habitat change, pollution, hunting and other human exploitation. A summary of conservation action undertaken by the seven constituent countries is also provided. The final chapter looks at the breeding birds, discussing breeding seasons and providing an explanation of the subsequent species accounts. At the end of the book, a useful table of the breeding birds includes estimates of population size and an assessment of

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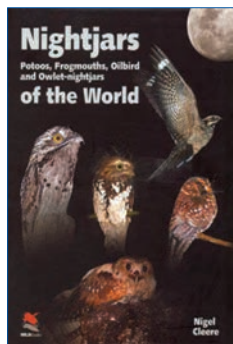


status. A gazetteer lists all the place-names mentioned in the text together with co-ordinates and atlas-square numbers. Appropriately, the bibliography was compiled by Effie Warr.

Despite the book's title, this is much more than an atlas. It is a treasure trove of information on Arabia's birds and a baseline for future research. Anyone with an interest in the region will surely want a copy. It is beautifully produced and well edited, and the glossy paper is perfect for the

reproduction of maps and photographs. The book was produced as a special volume of the long-running Fauna of Arabia series, which is effectively a journal; unfortunately, that means that it comes with a high price tag. Hopefully, a more affordable edition will also be produced because it would be a great shame if this major work did not reach the wider audience that it deserves.

*Nigel Redman*



## Nightjars, Potoos, Frogmouths, Oilbird and Owlet-nightjars of the World

By Nigel Cleere

WILDGuides, 2010

Hbk, 464pp, many colour photographs

ISBN 978-1-903657-07-2 Subbuteo code M20534

£45.00 **BB Bookshop price £40.00**

In 1998 Nigel Cleere brought us *Nightjars: a guide to Nightjars and related nightbirds*. That was one of the 'Helm guides' and was illustrated with full colour plates by Dave Nurney. It was a comprehensive study of this group with lengthy texts, including long plumage descriptions, detailed accounts of behaviour and much more.

Twelve years on, this current work is quite a contrast: lavishly illustrated with many superb photographs, it is somewhat minimalist on text, at least in the species accounts. The first 60 pages include the usual introductory sections with chapters on distribution of the Caprimulgiformes, plumage and structure, general biology, and taxonomy of the Caprimulgiformes, but these are also illustrated with many large photographs so the text is much reduced compared with the introductory chapters in the early work.

Photography has moved on in leaps and bounds since 1998, of course, and the vast majority of images in this new book have been taken since the earlier title was published. Indeed, it is doubtful whether a book of this kind could have been produced in 1998 and undoubtedly it would have contained far more photographs of specimens; the current volume does include these for a few species still lacking decent field shots, but they are now comparatively few. Clearly, the purpose of the current guide is to reproduce in one place as comprehensive a collection of photographs as possible of this fascinating group, and in that it succeeds admirably: page after page of stun-

ning images reproduced at a large size (just two to a page in a large-format book). But I have to admit that given the difficulty of identifying most of these birds in the field – especially nightjars, where within tropical regions at least, a number of species can occur together – I would have liked to see more text on identification. The author does include a Main Confusion Species heading, but sometimes this simply states 'none'. While this is clearly appropriate for species with limited ranges or where few other species occur (for example, on Caribbean islands), it doesn't seem very helpful for species that have a wide distribution across continents where there are lots of other species (for example, Little Nightjar *Antrostomus parvulus*, widespread across much of central South America; Indian Nightjar *Caprimulgus asiaticus*, widespread across India and much of southeast Asia; and Swamp Nightjar *C. natalensis*, widespread across much of Africa). I certainly don't find these species so distinctive as to regard them as having no confusion species within their extensive ranges.

But I'm picking on just one aspect here. Large and detailed maps are included for all species, brief summaries are given for length, identification, vocalisations, habitat, breeding, range and status. And perhaps this is enough in a photographic guide of this kind. Those wanting more detailed information about any particular aspect will probably still want to refer to the author's earlier work, but overall this is a superb book with a magnificent collection of stunning photographs and can be recommended.

*David Fisher*

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## Kingfisher

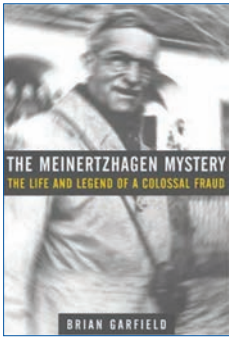
By David Chandler and Ian Llewellyn  
New Holland, 2010

Hbk, 126pp, many colour photographs  
ISBN 978-1-84773-524-9 Subbuteo code M20597  
£12.99 **BB Bookshop price £11.50**

An impressive collection of photographs provides the foundation for this book, the majority taken by Ian Llewellyn and including images from within the nest tunnel as well as a good mixture of close-up and landscape shots of adult birds. The accompanying text by David Chandler provides an informal overview of this enduringly popular bird, the 'blue blur' as he likes to call it, pitched primarily at a general audience but with sufficient detail to be of interest to more serious students of the species. There are plenty of interesting anecdotes that help to enliven the text, some from the literature and others based on the authors' own

observations. My favourite involved a plucky individual that was seen to blast its way through a snow-covered layer of ice, popping back up through the hole it had just made with a fish! A rather less fortunate bird found itself 'glued' to the metal pipe it was perching on by the onset of freezing weather. Personally, I would have liked to see a little more detail about the conservation status of the species and its prospects for the future but, that apart, this is an informative and enjoyable book.

*Ian Carter*



## The Meinertzhagen Mystery: the life and legend of a colossal fraud

By Brian Garfield  
Potomac Books, 2007  
Hbk, 353pp, eight black-and-white plates  
ISBN 978-1-59797-160-7 Subbuteo code M20073  
£23.00 **BB Bookshop price £20.00**

In recent years, as the extent of Richard Meinertzhagen's ornithological deception has become apparent, there has been increasing scrutiny of the recorded details of this and other areas of his apparently epic life. The 'legend' of Richard Meinertzhagen has been widely published. Most famously it includes such 'Boy's Own' tales as the Haversack Ruse (in which he claims to have dropped a haversack containing forged documents designed to divert Turkish reinforcements from the British attack on Beersheba in 1917). His story also encompasses a lifetime of military and expeditionary adventure: the gunfights, murders and massacres in the Middle East, East Africa, and India, his 'licence to kill' on espionage and intelligence service missions, such as the elimination of a cell of Spanish communists and the rescue of one of the Romanov children. There are also his pre-war meetings with Hitler, where he notoriously carried a revolver and later regretted not taking his opportunity to use it.

The thesis of Brian Garfield's book is that although these events have been published and

republished many times, in most cases the only documentary evidence that they actually occurred lies within Meinertzhagen's own diaries or in accounts that originated or were influenced by Meinertzhagen himself. However, Meinertzhagen's 'diaries' are not a contemporary account of events as they happened, but were often written some time, sometimes years, later than the dates they purport to cover; large tracts were revised several times with the benefit of hindsight, and to the aggrandisement of the man. When the facts can be crossed-checked – usually a tedious process of sifting through continental plates of military or biographical records – they are found to be inconsistent with the truth and are, at best, based loosely on reality, or complete fabrications. Very few of the legendary episodes in Meinertzhagen's life appear to have really happened. The Haversack Ruse is an exception in that there was a haversack and Meinertzhagen was involved in putting it together. But it was not his idea, he did not drop it in Turkish territory, and when the Turkish army found it they saw through the fabrication and ignored it.

This leads to the tragic conclusion of the book. Meinertzhagen was an exceptionally intelligent

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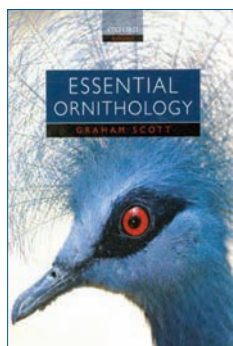
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and able man who could count genuine scientific and other achievements in the course of his busy and high-profile life. But his achievements were never enough – he felt the need to exaggerate them and invent new ones for posterity. Garfield paints a picture of a man with a malignant narcissistic pathology who was protected and covered by his peers in upper echelons of the class system that he perpetuated, such that at the time of his death he may have felt that he had got away with it. Those

who knew Meinertzhagen well were usually aware of some area of his activities where he behaved dishonestly. The contribution of this book is to bring the separate ornithological, personal and military deceptions together in one place, and enable the reader to catch a glimpse of the whole of the man, as he recedes into the metaphorical Hall of Mirrors where he lived his life.

*Martin Collinson*



### Essential Ornithology

By Graham Scott

Oxford University Press, 2010

162pp, 33 colour photographs

Hbk, ISBN 978-0-19-856998-5 Subbuteo code M20747

£60.00 **BB Bookshop price £54.00**

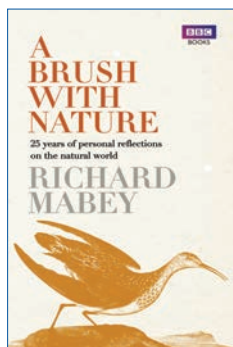
Pbk, ISBN 978-0-19-856997-8 Subbuteo code M20748

£27.50 **BB Bookshop price £24.75**

As stated on the back cover, this volume provides the reader with a 'concise but comprehensive introduction to the biology of birds', with chapters on evolution, reproduction and migration in addition to more ecological subjects such as foraging, predator avoidance and population/community ecology. I wouldn't disagree with the follow-up statement that this is probably a 'must read' as an introduction to the subject for degree-level students taking a relevant course. I was rather less convinced by the suggestion that the book will also appeal to a 'broader audience of professional researchers, consultants, and amateur ornithologists'. The text is certainly very readable, is bang up to date, and usefully includes 'key references' and 'concepts' as

notes in the margin, where relevant. I also liked the 'flight path' feature, which provides clear cross-referencing to other sections of the book with related topics. There are, however, a number of books on the market dealing with bird biology which cover the same subject areas in considerably more detail than this volume and are therefore likely to be more useful as sources of reference for both professional and amateur ornithologists. The current volume looks rather poor value for money at £60.00 for a hardback of under 200 pages that is by no means lavishly illustrated. The paperback version may be a better bet for financially hard-pressed students, who are likely to benefit most from this text.

*Ian Carter*



### A Brush with Nature

By Richard Mabey

BBC Books, 2010

Hbk, 256pp

ISBN 978-1-84-607913-9 Subbuteo code M20640

£12.99 **BB Bookshop price £11.50**

Although he was already a well-known and successful wildlife and environment writer well before its publication, Richard Mabey probably first became known to many people through his remarkable

*Flora Britannica* – the groundbreaking book that was to lead to Mark Cocker's *Birds Britannica*. All along the way, Mabey was contributing a column to one of the world's very best environment magazines, *BBC Wildlife*; it is a selection of these contributions, going back over 25 years, that is the basis of *A Brush with Nature*.



The sequence is not chronological, but by broad subject headings. There are seven of these, reflecting the author's wide range of wildlife and wildlife-related interests. I thought at first that allotting just 35 pages to birds was a bit mean, but I then discovered that birds were a recurring topic throughout the other chapters: the articles, when you read them as a selected collection, are actually about the whole complex web of life which so clearly fascinates the author. With that thought in mind, you cannot but enjoy them. You are there in the field, looking at real birds, plants or whatever – or, as you read the final section on 'Issues', you are pitched into the debates about reintroductions, Ruddy Ducks *Oxyura jamaicensis*, the arrogance of certain sectors of the field sports movement and their scribes... and so on.

In the book's preface, Richard Mabey describes how he set out to 'remind readers of the great English language tradition of nature writing, which seemed to have died from neglect – and

from an avalanche of soulless coffee-table books'. The articles, however, evolved into much more than that, seeking out how the 'breakdown of the links between specialist natural history and the arts, politics, morals and our culture as a whole' came about, and exploring how that breakdown might be repaired.

To understand that story properly, you will have to read this book; borrow it from the library if you decide not to buy it. You will agree with Mabey that things have improved a lot; you will probably disagree with some of his arguments (though, I venture to suggest, not too many), while appreciating his even-handed and commonsense approach. You will find, too, a man who not only loves and understands his subject matter, but also has the enviable ability to tell us how and why. I think that he is already part of that great writing tradition he set out to recall and revive.

*Mike Everett*

## A Naturalist's Guide to the Birds of Malaysia and Singapore

By G. W. H. Davison and Yeap Chin Aik

Beaufoy Books, Oxford

Pbk, 176pp

ISBN 978-1-906780-21-0 Subbuteo code M20680

£9.99 **BB Bookshop price £8.99**

This small photographic pocket guide describes itself as an 'easy-to-use identification guide to the 280 bird species most frequently seen in Sabah, Sarawak, Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore'. But with 656 species recorded from Peninsular Malaysia alone, of which 445 are resident, this is quite a claim as this guide barely scratches the identification surface. A representative selection of species, both residents and winter visitors, from a variety of habitats is included, and most are illustrated with a single photograph, although for some two are used. These are of a high standard and taken by some of the most renowned birders and photographers active in the region. Although space is limited, the majority are reproduced at a useful size, and accompanied by short texts describing the species, its distribution, habits and habitat, and conservation status.

This book seems to be aimed at all-round naturalists with an interest in identifying birds they encounter on a casual wildlife walk. Many of the species illustrated are fairly common and readily found in and around gardens, parks, secondary

forest and scrub, and wetlands. A few species typical of primary rainforest and montane forest are also included. While many of the birds illustrated are common and widespread throughout this vast region, others are much less so. Superb photographs of such rarely seen species and highly sought-after species including Malaysian Peacock-Pheasant *Polyplectron malacense*, Whitehead's Trogon *Harpactes whiteheadi*, and Bornean Ground Cuckoo *Carpococcyx radiatus* are included, which few except the most dedicated of birders are likely to come across.

With bird names given in English and Bahasa Malaysia, this book will appeal to a local audience and overseas visitors, and it is to be commended for the high quality of the photographs selected. But, as with most photographic guides, it is unlikely to accompany keen birders, who will travel with one or more of the comprehensive field guides to the region that illustrate all species in a variety of plumages.

*Peter Kennerley*

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The final chapter looks at the breeding birds, discussing breeding seasons and providing an explanation of the subsequent species accounts. At the end of the book, a useful table of the breeding birds includes estimates of population size and an assessment of status. A gazetteer lists all the place-names mentioned in the text together with co-ordinates and atlas-square numbers. Appropriately, the bibliography was compiled by Effie Warr. Despite the book's title, this is much more than an atlas. It is a treasure trove of information on Arabia's birds and a baseline for future research. Anyone w Breeding birds of the Arabian region belong to 20 taxonomic orders and considerable differences exist among these groups in both species numbers as well as threatened status (see Table 5). Passeriformes constitute the majority of breeding birds. Pelecaniformes (71.4%), Anseriformes (80%), Falconiformes(65.4%), and Gruiformes (100%) are particularly threatened. This assessment has revealed that around 25% of breeding birds in the Arabian Peninsula are threatened (Critically Endangered, Endangered, Vulnerable) or Near Threatened, according to the IUCN Categories and Criteria. Of the remainder, 247 species are assessed as Least Concern and one as Data Deficient. Jennings, M.C. (2010) Atlas of the breeding birds of Arabia. Fauna of Arabia 25.