

# Reviews

## WYE VALLEY

By George Peterken.  
HarperCollins, New Naturalist  
Series 105, London, 2008.  
466 pages; numerous colour  
photographs and other  
illustrations.  
Hardback: ISBN 978-0-00-  
716068-6, £44.99.  
Paperback: ISBN 978-0-00-  
716069-3, £24.99.

This is the fourth book in the series to deal with an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (or its Scottish equivalent). In fact, it goes well beyond the strict boundaries of the AONB by including most of the Forest of Dean to the east, a considerable area to the west (around and to the north of the Monnow catchment) and the interesting foreshore of the Severn, from Lydney down to Caldicot. It deals only incidentally with the Wye above Hereford.

This is an extraordinary area, famed by poets and topographers since the eighteenth century. Wordsworth's 'wreaths of smoke' did not, as he allowed himself to fancy, come from hermits in the gorge, but from forges or charcoal burners, whose industry was part of the scene to which tourists were drawn in their search for the picturesque, or even the sublime. Almost all our rivers lose their excitement as they approach the

sea, but just as the Wye seems to follow this pattern in the placid country below Hereford, it plunges like some Cretan torrent into a savage gorge, to emerge under Chepstow Castle into the mudflats.

The author of this enthralling study, a well-known forester, has the many-dimensional task of presenting the Wye as it now is and as it has developed over eons of time. He moves easily from geology and the prehistoric family whose footsteps have been found below the ooze, to the Cistercians of Tintern and the problems of twentieth-century development in agriculture, plantation, tourism and urban sprawl. Before the Severn was bridged, this was a remoter place, even after the arrival of the railways; now Chepstow can be two hours from London.

The trees, flowers and fungi have long been studied, most notably by the famous Woolhope Club, one of whose jokey menu cards is illustrated. Many interesting plants have been saved only by the reserves which have been developed from small, unworkable fields. In the woods, now little managed, there are famous trees, such as the Service-tree *Sorbus domestica* which was first noticed by a ninth-century Welsh monk.

As a recording area for natural history, this is particularly complicated, as two countries and three counties are concerned. For birds, despite the famous Peregrine

Falcons *Falco peregrinus* of Symonds Yat and the newly arrived Goosanders *Mergus merganser*, much of the interest is concentrated in the Forest of Dean, with its Northern Goshawks *Accipiter gentilis* and Pied Flycatchers *Ficedula hypoleuca*. There are two main sections on ornithology.

This is a very readable work, even for those who may be inclined to skip chapters where background knowledge and training are needed. Among its various delights are the Lesser Horseshoe Bats *Rhinolophus hipposideros* of St Briavel's Common, the 'tsunami' of 1607 and the huge caverns beneath the hooves of the Chepstow racehorses.

There are perhaps more general questions on the present purpose of the series, which was launched on a post-war flood of natural history interest, especially among the young. It has, unfortunately, become a matter of investment rather than practical use; one hears of bookcases full of reversed spines lest they fade in the sunlight. This cannot have been intended, though it has been encouraged by the publishers for many years. I cannot imagine what induced them to abandon right-hand justification or to adopt the odd, indented subheading, both of which, to my thinking, spoil one's enjoyment of the text.

David Ballance

## BIRDSOUNDS OF NORTHERN SIBERIA

By Christoph Zöckler.  
BirdSounds.nl, 2007. MP3-CD  
of 97 species. Product Code  
111047. €29.95. Available from  
[www.birdsounds.nl](http://www.birdsounds.nl)

This recording covers 97 species that breed in the most remote northern regions of Arctic Siberia, from the Taimyr Peninsula in the west to Chukotka in the east. Christoph Zöckler, who compiled

this selection and, indeed, made the majority of the recordings featured, is no stranger to the region, having participated in no fewer than eight expeditions to it.

Northern Siberia and the birds that breed there hold a special place in the imagination of many western ornithologists. Eagerly I placed the disc in my CD player only to realise that this is an MP3-CD. Reluctantly leaving the comfort of the sitting room, I listened to it on a computer. Within moments, any discomfort was forgotten and I was

transported to the open tundra, frozen lakes, upland and mountain tundra and northern limits of the taiga forest.

The recording begins with some beautiful, eerie calls of divers (Gaviidae) and ends with the songs of many exciting passerines, including Pechora Pipit *Anthus gustavi*, Siberian Rubythroat *Luscinia calliope* and Pallas's Reed Bunting *Emberiza pallasii*. For me, however, it was the evocative songs of the waders that stole the show. Some of these familiar to British

birders were rendered exotic by their strange and wonderful songs. Others, such as the mysterious Pintail Snipe *Gallinago stenura*, became even more wondrous as I listened, trying to imagine how they behaved and what their summer homes must be like.

Technically, the quality of the recording varies from species to species. On a few tracks there is some background noise, such as light wind on the microphone, but this is hardly surprising on the exposed open tundra. In others, additional species are audible in the background, but these are clearly described in the accompanying

booklet. In some cases, the background noise has been edited but fortunately this does not affect the sound or tone of the species in question. Personally, I like the background accompaniment of other species, insects and even the occasional gust of wind, as they add to the feeling of being in the open tundra. Some of the less successful recordings are of species that are more widely known, such as Bluethroat *L. svecica*, Redwing *Turdus iliacus* and even Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*, which seem to have been added for the sake of completeness.

At the end of the disc are four

longer sequences entitled 'Soundscapes'. These help to capture the essence of various habitats and are particularly enjoyable. In stark contrast are the fascinating but increasingly frightening recordings of mosquito (Culicidae) intensity from level 1 to level 5.

In short, this is a superb collection of songs and calls of birds nesting in northern Siberia. For most western observers, many of the species' vocalisations were previously unknown, unavailable or represented only in the form of their non-breeding calls.

James McCallum

### THE BIRDS OF ZAMBIA

By Robert J. Dowsett, Dylan R. Aspinwall and Françoise Dowsett-Lemaire.  
Tauraco Press, 2008.  
606 pages; 38 colour and 19 black-and-white photographs; 720 maps.  
ISBN 978-2-87225-005-9.  
Paperback, £29.99.

Following on from their impressive *Birds of Malawi* (Tauraco Press, 2006), this is another fine work from the formidable Dowsetts that advances our knowledge of the African avifauna. It is, in fact, the sixth account of the birds of Zambia in about 70 years but goes far beyond its predecessors in describing and mapping the distribution of over 750 species. The work on the distribution maps started in the early 1970s, when the late Dylan Aspinwall was a major driving force behind Zambian ornithology. An atlas project was started in 1975 and records were included up to 2007. Over time, these records have been added by a succession of ornithologists, many of whom have been posted to the country for professional reasons – not least the Dowsetts. The result is a particularly extensive assessment of status and distribution which

benefits from being very up to date, particularly through an upsurge in local activity in the late 1990s.

Accounts are given for all known species on the Zambian list and colour maps are provided for all 626 known breeders and around 100 migrants. Vagrants are included but do not benefit from a map. Each account covers distribution, ecology, status, breeding dates, and taxonomy. But the maps are the real prize, with 303 squares covering 30 × 30 minutes each (about 53 km × 55 km).

Zambia is a large country and is three times the size of the UK, although at 750,000 km<sup>2</sup> it is still only a third of the size of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Despite a reasonable road network, much of it is remote and difficult to visit. Many of the 19 national parks are quite isolated, and in total they cover 8.5% of the country and around 95% of the bird species.

The species overlap between Zambia and other neighbouring countries (particularly Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo) is considerable, but by comparison it is a relatively safe destination. Of particular interest are 64 species that are confined to the Zambezian region of endemism – 57 of which occur in Zambia itself, within its

woodlands, dry forests and flooded dambos. Sixteen pages of colour photographs illustrate the habitats of some of the country's key species, including its only endemic, the near-threatened Chaplin's Barbet *Lybius chaplini*, and also Africa's most localised parrot, the vulnerable Black-cheeked Lovebird *Agapornis nigrigenis*.

An extensive introduction describes all of the main habitat types and climatic considerations. There is also a great deal of information on the pioneers of Zambian ornithology, including those who have achieved so much in the last decade. As might be expected from the authors, this book is authoritative and clear, providing concise information in a way that allows it to be interpreted quickly. A gazetteer of around 800 sites is included together with references from over 900 sources.

To date, relatively few bird-tour companies have given much prominence to Zambia – perhaps because of the lack of endemics. Those choosing to organise their own visits have been looking for detailed distributional data. Now they have it in a book that is a great example of comprehensive but efficient coverage.

Keith Betton

**A PHOTOGRAPHIC GUIDE  
TO THE BIRDS OF JAPAN  
AND NORTH-EAST ASIA**

By Tadao Shimba.  
Christopher Helm, A&C Black,  
London, 2007. 504 pages;  
colour photographs;  
distribution maps.  
ISBN 978-0-7136-7439-2.  
Paperback, £24.99.

This is the first book to cover the Japanese avifauna in English for over 25 years, but, just like Siberian Blue Robins *Luscinia cyane* in Britain, the second will soon follow the first: *Birds of East Asia* by Mark Brazil is due to appear this winter (from the same publisher).

I'm not a huge fan of photographic guides, but this compact book crams an awful lot of photos and information into its 500 pages. Not only does it cover all the species likely to be seen in Japan, but it also incorporates the Korean Peninsula, northeastern China and the Russian

Far East. Nearly 600 species are represented by over 1,500 colour photos. There are generally several photos of each species, and a helpful feature is that all are labelled with age/sex, date and location, and with the race depicted where appropriate. The vast majority were taken within Japan.

The photos are very good, but given that this is a 'pocket guide' the small page size does not do the photos justice. The bird is often relatively small in the image, and the design looks cramped. Additional detail for each species includes a brief identification summary, description of voice and a helpful pointer to similar species, usually with separating features to look for. There are also distribution maps, which, although not precise, given the huge area covered, do give a good indication of ranges, and a short summary of the species' status in Japan – just in case you think you've found a first! So, the plus points are superb photographs, small size and the fact that it's in English (though a

table listing the Japanese names next to the English names is also included), but those wanting to drool over the pictures or who need detailed ID notes will probably be left feeling short-changed.

The best for 25 years, this will be an automatic buy for those visiting the region shortly, or those who live there, but I suspect that it will probably be quickly relegated to second best when a true ID guide is published in the winter. Nevertheless, this book represents good value for money, so most birders will probably opt to have both – just in case! Even if you have not visited the areas covered, the array of mouth-watering 'Sibes' might make it a useful photo-reference for European birders, but at a time when the internet is becoming THE reference tool for birders seeking out photos, how long will photographic guides such as these retain a place in their libraries?

*Russell Slack*

**A FIELD GUIDE TO THE  
BIRD SONGS AND CALLS  
OF BRITAIN AND  
NORTHERN EUROPE**

By Dave Farrow. Carlton  
Books, London, 2008.  
224 pages; many colour  
illustrations; two CDs.  
ISBN 978-1-84442-042-1.  
Hardback, £19.99.

Space was made available by the publisher for just 200 species, so it must have been hard to decide which birds to omit, particularly when northern Europe had to be covered in addition to Britain. Those selected for this guide are generally those with distinctive songs and calls, but the restriction of numbers has resulted in some surprising omissions. No Canada geese *Branta canadensis/hutchinsii*, no Barnacle Goose *B. leucopsis* and, more importantly, no White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*. Although restricted as a breeding bird to Iceland, Great Northern Diver *Gavia immer* is included, and yet Red-throated *G.*

*stellata* and Black-throated Divers *G. arctica* are not. The decision to leave out Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis* is odd when birds like Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* are included. And where is Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*? Coverage of passerines is, however, much more comprehensive and includes Parrot *Loxia pytyopsittacus* and Scottish Crossbill *L. scotica*.

The recordings have been acoustically cleaned up to maximise their effectiveness in aiding identification. A total of 100 species is included on each disc. Mostly they are in stereo, although not to the extent that you would particularly notice. Dave Farrow contributed just over a third of the tracks, while Jan-Erik Bruun and Hannu Jannes provided most of the remainder. An index to the recordings is given in the order they are played. As a sound enthusiast, I would have liked some information on where and when they were made, although perhaps not many users would look for that level of detail.

The book contains information on the species featured, with a page

on each one, including a colour illustration by either Brin Edwards or Mike Langman. Information is given on identification and habitat, together with a description of the song and/or call. An introductory section gives tips on fieldcraft, together with an overview of bird sounds and how they are used by birds. Explanations of acoustical terms are given too.

For anyone looking for a basic, introductory set of recordings, this provides much of what is needed at an attractive price. It does, however, include a number of northern species that have never appeared in Britain while ignoring several that breed here regularly. This guide is small enough to carry around in the field. By comparison, the new Mitchell Beazley guide is far too hefty for that – but for an extra £5.00 that gives you recordings of a further 50 species and is more useful if visiting southern Europe. Neither book is comprehensive in its coverage.

*Keith Betton*

**THE BIRDS OF ALDERNEY**

By Jeremy G. Sanders. The Press at St Anne, Alderney, 2007. 320 pages; numerous line-drawings; three maps. ISBN 978-0-946760-61-9. Hardback, £25.00.

This is the first-ever avifauna of Alderney, the smallest of the three main Channel Islands. It covers more than 130 years of recording, from published and unpublished sources, including contributions from over 100 amateur observers. The author has made the biggest contribution to this, having made records almost daily over the last quarter of a century.

The book opens with a general description of the island, including a succinct account of the changes in land use over the last two centuries. This is nicely illustrated by Carmen Watson's sketches, which are liberally sprinkled throughout the book. Next follows a chapter entitled 'The Birds', which contains a brief review of various categories such as seabirds, coastal wading birds, inland breeding birds (of which there are few) and migrants. Emphasis is rightly put on the important seabird populations, with the dramatic expansion of the Northern Gannet *Morus bassanus* colony, from one pair in 1940 to over 7,400 at the time of writing, and the equally dramatic decline of the Puffin *Fratercula arctica*, from an estimated 100,000 individuals in 1949 to about 250 today, discussed

at length. The introductory sections are completed with a review of ornithology on Alderney. A number of eminent ornithologists have visited the island, often on several occasions or at length, including William Eagle Clarke in 1898, and Peter Conder regularly from 1950 until 1993.

The systematic list comprises 230 pages and 277 species, although the total is given as 273 on the dust jacket. Entries vary from a few lines for vagrants to detailed accounts for various seabirds, including almost ten and 17 pages respectively for Gannet and Puffin. Many of the records included are cited to the observers responsible. Most accounts for the scarcer migrants and winter visitors consist of a narrative of all the available records, although they lack analysis and are often vague, e.g. for Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin* we are told that spring migrants are normally recorded in April and May, and autumn migrants in September and early October. There is a good selection of records of vagrants, including species common in southern England, e.g. Green Woodpecker *Picus viridis* (one undated record for 1961 and one in May 1969), and three not on the British List. The author attempts to clarify the criteria for the inclusion of records of rarities, some of which have been submitted to various bodies since the 1950s. He states that he has particularly taken into account the opinions of the Alderney County Bird Recorders,

and that records that he does not consider reliable have not been included. Interestingly, he has included two spring records of Booted Eagle *Aquila pennata* seen by the author – full descriptions were taken but we are not told what phase they were, and no information is given about whether the records were assessed by a committee; a hearsay record of a Dipper *Cinclus cinclus* referring to the winter of 1861/62; a record of an Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis* in October 1998 said to be 'unconfirmed'; and two recent records of Red-headed Bunting *Emberiza bruniceps*. As these examples show, the author has missed the opportunity to create a definitive list of species reliably recorded on the island, although that was probably not his intention when he set out to write the book. The final section, entitled sketches of Alderney's birds, consists of series of illustrations of various species with brief text, largely a repetition of the other parts of the book. This confirms the author's dilemma – whether to compile an authoritative book on the birds reliably recorded on the island, or to write a volume appealing to a wider, less-specialised audience. Unfortunately, he has fallen between the two stools.

For anyone interested in the birds of Alderney, this is an essential reference, but I await the publication of a definitive *Birds of the Channel Islands* with interest!

John Clark

**Short reviews****A GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF ANGUILLA**

By Steve H. Holliday, Karim V. D. Hodge and Damien E. Hughes. RSPB, Sandy, 2007. 122 pages; many colour photographs, maps. ISBN 978-1-905601-10-3. Paperback, £19.50.

This guide is an introduction to the birds of this UK Overseas Territory. Sandwiched between an introductory section and a checklist of the birds of the archipelago are species descriptions – though only 60 of the 132 species in the checklist are treated in any detail – and 21 pages of site descriptions, with maps. All proceeds from the sale of the guide will support the work of the Anguilla National Trust.

**BIRDWATCHING GUIDE TO OMAN**

By Dave E. Sargeant, Hanne & Jens Eriksen.

Al Roya Publishing, Muscat, Oman, 2008.

256 pages; 64 maps and 135 colour photographs.

ISBN 978-9948-03-643-2. Paperback, £22.99.

Second edition of this guide (for review of first edition see *Brit. Birds* 95: 33), which is completely revised and updated in the light of large-scale changes to Oman's infrastructure and tourism facilities since 2001. All maps have been re-drawn and incorporate GPS co-ordinates. Some birding sites covered in the first edition have disappeared but new ones have been added; species status and site lists are updated to include observations to the end of 2007.

SUSSEX WILDLIFE

By David Mortimer.

Snake River Press, Alfriston, Sussex, 2008.

96 pages; few illustrations and a stylised map.

ISBN 978-1-906022-09-9. Hardback, £8.99.

Recalling the King Penguins of the 1950s, although with illustrations more akin to Thomas Bewick's woodcuts of 150 years earlier, this compact book is part of the 'Sussex Guide' series by Snake River Press, which includes such titles as *20 Sussex Gardens* and *20 Sussex Walks*. Four pages are devoted to each of the author's 20 favourite wildlife reserves, although this rigid format is sometimes restrictive. The accounts are perhaps best described as guided commentaries and, with no site maps and only one or two lines of directions, those after a 'where to watch' guide should look elsewhere.

All aspects of wildlife are covered, with perhaps most emphasis given to flowers and insects, while the birds mentioned are sometimes inaccurate or rather optimistic. For example, Little Terns *Sternula albifrons* no longer breed at Pagham Harbour, and have not done so since 1990, while Wood Warblers *Phylloscopus sibilatrix* are only likely to be encountered with considerable good fortune on passage at Park Corner Heath. The use of scientific names is erratic and the redstarts referred to as breeding on the cliffs at Hastings County Park would be Black *Phoenicurus ochruros*, these having done so there sporadically in the past. Despite these shortcomings, most readers should find something of interest in each account, even if the reserve is already well known to them. I found the brief histories of some sites particularly educational.

Richard Fairbank

GUIDE TO BRITISH OWLS AND OWL PELLETS

By Leanne Thomas, illustrated by Chris Shields. FSC Publications, Shrewsbury, 2008. Fold-out laminated brochure, colour illustrations, black-and-white line drawings. ISBN 978-1-85153-235-3. £2.75.

Produced by the Field Studies Council in co-operation with the Hawk & Owl Trust, this well-designed fold-out brochure is a simple introduction to the five species of owls breeding regularly in Britain (Barn *Tyto alba*, Little *Athene noctua*, Tawny *Strix aluco*, Long-eared *Asio otus* and Short-eared *A. flammeus*) and their pellets. There are brief but useful discussions on such matters as hunting methods, population status, conservation and the dissection of pellets. Typical examples of owl pellets, and other pellets with which they may be confused (such as those cast by Common Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus* and Eurasian Sparrowhawks *Accipiter nisus*), are illustrated, as well as a selection of whole skulls, jaws, teeth and other assorted remains. This inexpensive, clearly written and nicely illustrated work will undoubtedly be of great assistance to its main target audience of students and their teachers.

Pete Combridge

HOBBIES AND OTHER FALCONS...NEAR MY HOUSE

By Brian L. Kington. Published privately, Coleshill, 2007. Many colour photos and line-drawings.

No ISBN. Paperback, £10.99 inc. p&p from the author, 22 Burman Drive, Coleshill, B46 3NB.

Brian Kington is a raptor enthusiast, and this slim paperback tells the story of his quest for insights into the lives of three species of falcon which occur close to his home in the English Midlands. Most of the booklet (roughly 80%) is devoted to the Hobby *Falco subbuteo*, while the 'other falcons' given less space are Merlin *F. columbarius* and Peregrine Falcon *F. peregrinus*. This is no scientific treatise, and I suspect that not everyone will necessarily agree with some of the author's views and ideas, but many raptorphiles, especially those interested in Hobbies, will find this booklet both interesting and enjoyable.

Pete Combridge

BIRDWATCHER'S POCKET COMPANION

By Malcolm Tait. Pavilion Books, London. 2008.

143 pages. ISBN 978-1-862057-97-5.

Hardback, £6.99.

This is a small (9 cm x 14 cm) gift book that you can give to a friend for a birthday or Christmas. It is full of questions, answers, unusual facts and quirky lists. For instance, which birds should you look out for when thirsty? Wine-throated Hummingbird *Atthis ellioti* and Claret-breasted Fruit-dove *Ptilinopus viridis* are two suggestions, although I was surprised that there was no mention of the pint-sized Stout Cisticola *Cisticola robustus*... Apart from the zany entries, there are facts such as the UK birds that are declining fastest. But the funny entries win – including a list of songs such as *Be My Plover* by Alice Cooper!

Keith Betton

BIRDS

Edited by Mavis Pilbeam. The British Museum Press, London, 2008. 96 pages; colour illustrations. ISBN 978-0-7141-5063-5. Hardback, £9.99.

This attractively presented anthology takes images of birds from the collections of the British Museum (ranging from those of Thomas Bewick to the Japanese artist Kitagawa Utamaro) and matches them with a poem about the species illustrated; the writers chosen include Shakespeare, Tennyson and John Clare.

IDENTIFYING BIRDS BY COLOUR

By Moss Taylor and Norman Arlott. Collins, London,

2008. 224 pages, one or two colour paintings per

species. ISBN 978-0-00-720679-7. Paperback, £12.99.

Over 250 species covered, grouped according to colour, claiming to be the easiest way for beginners to identify birds. Maybe...

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