



West African Ornithological Society
Société d'Ornithologie de l'Ouest
Africain



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Reviews — Revues

Echassiers, Canards et Limicoles de l'Ouest Africain. Par O. Girard, 1998. 136 pp. Castel Éditions, Château d'Olonne. ISBN 2-910399-45-1, broché, FFr70. Disponible de l'O.N.C., Service documentation, Saint-Benoist, F-78610 Auffargis, France (frais de port FFr15).

Il s'agit essentiellement d'un manuel destiné à ceux qui s'occupent à quelque titre que ce soit des zones humides (baguage, dénombrements, protection) et des oiseaux qui s'y rapportent. En une trentaine de pages est rassemblé l'essentiel des méthodes de comptage (détaillées avec des exemples concrets), les moyens pratiqués, le baguage et une liste des centres européens avec leur adresse. Je n'ai cependant pas trouvé de chapitre sur les moyens de capture. L'importance des zones humides et leur gestion font également l'objet d'un chapitre. Le reste de l'ouvrage, 96 pages, est consacré à la description des espèces susceptibles de fréquenter les lieux humides. Considérant que ce petit guide sera le seul à être emporté sur le terrain, l'auteur a pris un soin particulier à décrire les espèces prêtant à confusion. C'est ainsi que les limicoles d'identification délicate, surtout sous le plumage d'hiver qu'ils portent habituellement en Afrique, sont l'objet d'un soin particulier. Toutes les espèces sont représentées en couleurs et une flèche souligne le caractère à rechercher; elles sont l'oeuvre de J. Chevallier et S. Nicolle. Elles sont toutes bonnes, voire très bonnes, et il faut en souligner la qualité pour un ouvrage de ce format. Les noms des espèces sont donnés en français, anglais et portugais.

Ce manuel était, dit l'auteur technicien de l'ONC, réclamé depuis longtemps dans l'Ouest africain. Nous le conseillons sans réserve à tous ceux qui "pratiquent" la sauvagine et pourquoi pas aux chasseurs un peu curieux.

Gérard J. Morel

The Bird Collectors. By B. Mearns & R. Mearns, 1998. xviii + 472 pp., many monochrome illustrations. Academic Press, London. ISBN 0-12-487440-1, hardback, £29.95.

If you "turn pale at the mere thought of killing birds", then consider: "Anyone who drives a car, uses products of the petro-chemical industries, owns a cat, has glass in the windows of their home, buys paper, or consumes electricity will be responsible for killing birds....Remember...that dead birds in museums are the only casualties that can be used to help the living." This eloquent justification of scientific collecting begins this book. Chapters 1 and 17 put scientific collecting in its fuller context: it is

insignificant in comparison with other killing for sport, food, vermin control and decoration, and with population reductions caused by habitat loss. A clear argument is set out that scientific collecting has, even in the past, had very little impact on bird populations, including extinctions.

The book goes on to consider the people who made the collections on which ornithology relies, many of whom suffered severe privations in the course of their work, and all too commonly met their deaths in the cause of their science. Most of the book groups biographies according to the type of person the collector was (traders, artists, government officers, medics, missionaries *etc.* The style of presentation sometimes seems a little stilted, especially in the introductions to each section, where continuity is often lacking; this improves in the later sections, where the relative contributions of the various actors to their aims becomes clearer, especially in the chapter on conservation. The biographies are generally good as brief introductions to some of the major players (but tantalisingly brief in many cases), and put faces and backgrounds to many familiar names; references are provided to longer biographies where they exist. Each chapter contains a lot of background information, such as on collecting standards, and the role of museums, dealers and rich private collectors. There are some fascinating journal extracts, including from participants in the "worst journey in the world", and exciting (and sobering) travelogues.

One interesting and recurring observation is the sensitivity of many of the collectors: so many wrote of their distaste for killing, although they were willing to overcome it in the cause of science. As Pat Hall notes, "In the final assessment it is understanding rather than sentimentality that will do most for the conservation of creatures other than ourselves." The final chapter is a summary of the need for collections and their many uses, without which much of natural history and zoology would be impossible. These needs and uses are so many that it takes 14 pages simply to summarize them, including their many benefits to conservation, a classic example being the proof of eggshell thinning correlated with pesticide use.

There is a useful appendix listing the biggest museum collections, with information on their holdings. This is followed by a list of biographical sources by subject person, plus a full bibliography. A lot of research has gone into this book, and the authors obviously enjoyed the search for information entailed. They reflect the feelings of many ornithologists in today's time of reduced funding for museums and systematic research, and misplaced concern for animal rights, when they quote V. Remsen: "Unless specimens continue to be collected, the current decades will be viewed as a dark age of scientific history, the time when scientists were unable to make permanent records of biodiversity because of opposition to scientific collecting."

Alan Tye