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**Birds of Liberia.** By W. Gatter, 1998. 320 pp., 4 col. plates, 107 photographs, maps figures. Pica Press, Mountfield. ISBN 1-873403-63-1, hardback, £40.

Liberia is unlikely to be on many people's list of top visiting priorities. It is hot and humid, and memories of the recent civil wars and attendant atrocities are still in people's minds. It has been virtually unknown ornithologically, except for work on Mt Nimba by Forbes-Watson and others (*The Birds of Mt Nimba, Liberia*. Colston & Curry-Lindahl, 1986, British Museum (Natural History), London). Now Wulf Gatter, who has spent some 15 years as a forester in Liberia, gives us the present work, beautifully produced by Pica Press.

The book's central section consists of the species accounts, each with a brief text in three sections (status, habits and ecology, annual cycle), accompanied for most residents and some migrants by a map. Maps are omitted for a few, rarely recorded, species. The 70-page introduction covers topography, climate, vegetation, seasonality, migration and ecology. As befits a forester, there is a comparative survey of the different forest types as found today as well as in the past. Liberia was once almost totally forested, with practically none of the natural tree savanna that is found in its neighbours. Gatter presents a gloomy picture of accelerating deforestation, with maps showing progressive forest fragmentation, even though, as recently as 1985, 50% of the country was still covered by high forest. By 1987, all high forest except Sapo National Park (disappointingly, not mapped) had been leased for logging, and "forestry" regressed to pure exploitation, continuing even during the 1990-6 war. Even following the extensive fragmentation, many open-country birds common in Sierra Leone are still either absent or extremely rare in Liberia.

On migration, Gatter has already written several papers, which are summarized here. Birds migrating roughly north-south around the western edge of the Sahara must, when they reach Liberia, turn due east if they are to continue overland. Many open-country migrants, particularly warblers, must concentrate, in Liberia, in very small areas, mostly in the mountains, unlike in Sierra Leone, where they spread more evenly right across the tree savanna.

Large sections of the introduction and appendices are devoted to niche occupation, including detailed new data on use of vegetation strata and branch sizes. Although this analysis reveals interesting new insights on habitat use, such detailed, original material might have reached a more appropriate audience through papers in scientific journals, rather than in this book.

The four plates are beautifully painted by Martin Woodcock and depict 29 species. It is not clear how these were chosen, as might also be said of the 56 colour photographs of birds, which range from good to adequate in quality (although the habitat photographs are admirable). I have my doubts about Plate 68, purportedly of *Phyllastrephus baumanni*, which is possibly the most misidentified species in Africa (L.D.C. Fishpool pers. comm.); unless the lighting is extremely distorting, the bird seems more likely to have been *P. albigularis*. This is worrying: once one finds an

apparent error, one inevitably wonders about other records. I also doubt the value of one appendix, where population estimates for the country are given for a number of species (with no reasons given for the selection made). How can one reliably decide that there are at least 4 million pairs of *Andropadus virens* and 1 million *A. latirostris*?

The author readily quotes others' findings and there is a good, though not totally complete, bibliography, but the vast majority of the records are his own: an impressive performance. Anyone interested in the Upper Guinea forest avifauna should read this book. Several species reach their known western limit in Liberia, and this book will be a yardstick against which to judge new finds for many years to come.

**Guide des Oiseaux de São Tomé et Príncipe.** By P. Christy & W.V. Clarke, 1998. 144 pp., 32 col. plates, two maps. ECOFAC, São Tomé. Hardback, no price given.

This book is a proper field identification manual, far more useful for this purpose than the recent work of R. de Naurois (1994: reviewed *Malimbus* 18: 63–64). However, although more up to date than Naurois, it is far less well referenced as a source of information on the status of the birds of the islands. One of its major shortcomings is the complete lack of any references, and of any information on the source and reliability of new records; many “new” species, especially seabirds, are included but the evidence presented is not strong for many of them, or at least they are not properly documented (observers, descriptions, conditions *etc.*).

An introduction, with site descriptions, is included in Portuguese, English and French, and bird names are given in all three languages, but the rest of the book is in French. The reason for this choice of language is obvious, in that the main author is French and the ECOFAC project is dominated by francophones, but it seems a pity that it was not issued in either Portuguese (which would be much more useful for the local population and many tourists) or English (probably the most widely known language among potential users of the book from outside the islands).

Not all species included are illustrated (106 of 143), which is a pity, especially for such difficult groups as the petrels; one would need to take another book for reliable seabird identification. But the descriptions are quite good. The plates have a distinctive style that can be somewhat distracting, but they are quite accurate representations, not as stylized as usual in field guides. The colours in many are much too bright and the iridescence very poorly represented by bright single colours, especially in the pigeons, sunbirds and starlings. An additional minor gripe is that the order of species on a plate is often upside down with reference to the order of the accompanying texts. Strangely, in the texts, the notes referring to a group (*e.g.* storm