



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



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more strictly comparative. This could be more important in future volumes dealing with larger families; the present volume includes 12 families, many of them small. The longest family sections are for kingfishers (57 pp.) and hornbills (50 pp.), with the individual species accounts in addition to this.

As usual in a work of this nature, every specialist will spot detailed errors. Mine included mistakes in the range description for *Halcyon malimbica* in the Gulf of Guinea (even though the reference putting the historical mistake right is quoted in the account), and mixed-up names in the photo captions on p. 456. But the frequency of such errors is minimal, and scarcely detracts from the enormous pleasure of reading this book. As usual, authors, photographers, artists and editors all deserve congratulations for it.

Alan Tye

Birds of Western Africa, N. Borrow & R. Demey, 2002. 832 pp., 147 col. plates, many maps. Christopher Helm, London. ISBN 0-7136-3959-8, hardback, £55.

W Africa as defined in this book almost coincides with the W Africa of *Malimbus*'s coverage, except that the book excludes the Democratic Republic of Congo (Kinshasa) and eastward. The Gulf of Guinea and Cape Verde groups are the only oceanic islands included. All 1285 species and most subspecies known or suspected to occur in this region are described, and nearly all illustrated. Maps are given for more than 1100 species.

Short introductory sections, totalling less than 30 pages, precede the plates, each with a facing page of brief captions, and then come the species texts with maps accompanying the texts. The introductory sections include geographical coverage, nomenclature, explanation of the layout and content of the species accounts and maps, climate, topography, habitats, conservation issues, glossary and abbreviations. The species texts include vernacular names in English and French, detailed descriptions, voice (giving where possible the CD and track number of Chappuis, C. 2000, *African Bird Sounds*, Société d'Etudes Ornithologiques de France, Paris), habits, similar species, status, distribution and taxonomic uncertainties, but not breeding. Among the text section are a few line drawings to illustrate identification features such as egret head shapes and weaver nests.

The book does not have plate opposite species text, impossible given the length of the texts in this work. The advantage of the former layout has been sacrificed for more textual information. The species texts are mainly good, but the maps are sometimes inaccurate in detail. As examples, the northern distribution limit depicted for many forest species in Sierra Leone omits their extension to the Freetown

Peninsula mountains, and outlier populations (e.g. Buff-spotted Flufftail, Preuss's Cliff Swallow) are sometimes omitted or inaccurately positioned.

The nomenclature used is generally very sensible, mostly following *Birds of Africa* vols 1–6 but in some cases preferring Dowsett & Forbes-Watson (1993, *Checklist of Birds of the African and Malagasy Regions*, vol. 1. Tauraco Press, Liège) or other recent treatments. Where there is doubt over (biological) species status, the taxon is usually treated as a full species. Some vernacular names used are odd (who uses São Tomé Olive Pigeon and Lesser Black-winged Lapwing?) but thankfully the most common name in W African usage is also usually given under “other names”.

The plates range from excellent to strange-looking. The oddity is more in proportions than plumage, with some species represented when standing with heads and feet too small (e.g. Pls 49–50 terns and 198 warblers, and some of the doves and waders). In some cases the same bird is depicted standing and in flight, and the comparison emphasizes the oddity in the former. Scale varies a lot between plates, with the birds on some shown very small (e.g. raptors, which remind one so strongly of the typical, tiny distant view through binoculars that one wonders whether this was deliberate!), but usually with the identification features clear. At the other extreme, some plates of small birds are strangely empty (e.g. Pl. 87 bulbuls), with the birds painted very large (e.g. Pl. 99 warblers). Key marks are not indicated on the plates but some are mentioned in facing legends. However, the plates seem sometimes to overemphasize field marks (e.g. *Tringa* spp. and gulls, Pl. 41 and 44), again perhaps deliberately. In some cases the plate does not indicate which subspecies is depicted (e.g. House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, Greater Swamp Warbler *Acrocephalus rufescens*). Plates are generally arranged taxonomically, with concessions to the need to compare similar species, but an exception is made for island endemics which are grouped on separate plates at the end, together with assorted “additional vagrant and localised” species. I would have preferred to have at least the latter in sequence; perhaps they were added as an afterthought. For some reason, the scientific name index does not give plate numbers for genera.

The above are detailed criticisms, but if there is an important problem with the book it is its weight, comparable to that of the two volumes of Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1970–3, *Birds of West Central and Western Africa*, Longman, London) and much greater than that of Serle & Morel (1977, *A Field Guide to the Birds of West Africa*, Collins, London). The book is, of course, more complete than the latter and much more up to date than the former but, even to someone used to carrying heavy field guides such as Hilty & Brown (1986, *A Guide to the Birds of Colombia*, Princeton University Press, Princeton), the weight of the present work seems unwarranted. It weighs and measures more than Hilty & Brown, but deals with only 75% as many species. Weight (and cost!) could have been reduced by using lighter, non-glossy paper, which would not have seriously compromised the longevity of the book: AT's copy of Hilty & Brown is losing its hard cover after several years of

almost daily field use, but the pages (lightweight but high-quality acid-free paper) are still in excellent condition.

However, what's the alternative? "Indispensable" is a word used too often in book reviews, but in this case, it is appropriate. Almost every field ornithologist in W Africa will want this book. For the moment, there is simply no competitor, although we await with interest the forthcoming Collins guide by van Perlo.

Alan Tye, Gérard Morel & Marie-Yvonne Morel