



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



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THE BIRDS OF AFRICA Vol I, by L.H. Brown, E.K. Urban and K. Newman, 1982, October, London: Academic Press (£53.40, \$99.00).

When Leslie Brown died in July 1980 he had been working on this book practically round the clock for many months, and it is a tragedy that he was not to live to see not only the publication of this remarkable work but also the completion of the series. By the look of Volume I, *THE BIRDS OF AFRICA* will ultimately comprise the most fitting tribute and memorial to this most gifted of African ornithologists. In concept the work was entirely Leslie Brown's, and I see it as extremely fortunate for ornithology in our continent that, in 1976, he chose Academic as his publisher. 'Persuaded' might be a better word, for, with Kingdon's seven-volume 'East African Mammals', this is the first large-format, highly illustrated, multi-volume faunal work that Academic have entered upon in their long and distinguished publishing history. It is a huge enterprise, which will run to at least five multi-authored volumes (Volume II, edited by E.K. Urban, C.H. Fry and S. Keith, has been written by a score of experts and is nearing completion), and it is wholly in character that Brown and his colleagues have produced a book of the highest academic excellence. The text makes best use of the bibliography of 1,500 up-to-the-minute references, but also draws extensively upon the authors' own massive experiences in west, east, central and southern Africa. Publishers' claims are not exactly neutral, but I cannot fault their remark that "These volumes are sure to be acclaimed as the authority on the avifauna of Africa for many years to come. The quality of the text and the beauty of the plates will assure them pride of place on the shelves of ornithologists and bird-watchers everywhere".

On their book-shelves, yes, but not exactly in their pockets. At 23 x 31 cm and 536 pages, *THE BIRDS OF AFRICA* is not a guide for field use; all the same, it has been written primarily for the field ornithologist. With its successors this volume (Ostrich to falcons) deals with all bird species known from mainland Africa. The introduction, commendably broad in scope, should serve one of the handbook's aims to "stimulate much-needed research on the avifauna of this fascinating continent".

Most species accounts use the heads Range and Status, Description, Field Characters (to aid identification), Voice, General Habits, Food, Breeding Habits, and References, and each of the long 'habits' sections deals with a number of readily identifiable topics by paragraphs. Distribution maps (approximately 8 x 9 cm) accompany every species account. These sometimes seem very generalised, recalling maps in Mackworth-Præd & Grant (1973) rather than those in Snow (1978). Larger maps providing greater detail would be more appropriate in this authoritative work. Apparently monophyletic groups with geographical representatives which occupy largely distinct ranges (superspecies) are commonly encountered in Africa (see page 2 of Brown's introduction). It would have been instructive and space-saving if ranges of such closely-related populations, and also where appropriate other allopatric congeners (e.g. the two *Bulweria* petrels), were plotted on single maps.

Twenty-eight colour plates, some useful figures, and an abundance of line drawings, contribute greatly to the attractiveness of the book. Peter Hayman's field-guide-style portraits (Plates 1-17) are of a high standard, although on 13 a Sacred Ibis lacks a toe. The plates by Martin Woodcock (18-32) are disappointing; clarity is sometimes marred by complicated compositions, weak colour and intrusive background. It is a pity that field-guide postures, facilitating comparison between species, are dispensed with in many plates.

Undoubtedly the book's most troublesome feature is the indirect labelling of plate illustrations. It is difficult to decipher a reduced silhouette key, and in order to find the name of a plate illustration the reader has to count images on a sometimes crowded page (like Plate 32). Readability could be improved if, beside each illustration, the label or reference code to an accompanying key were provided. Otherwise little space would be sacrificed if silhouettes matched illustrations in size and had labels superimposed rather than referred to by a number. The usefulness of the book as an identification aid would also be increased, and accounts of field characters complemented, if pointers directing attention to diagnostic features were added to the plates.

"The Birds of Africa" will be needed by libraries and coveted by ornithologists unable to afford it. The jacket price may deter some of those able to make best use of it, although handsome discounts have been available through major ornithological societies including WAOS. Improvements in labelling and style of the plates, and distribution maps of a higher standard, would be welcome in future volumes which will be eagerly awaited.

A. M. Jones

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noticed in *Malimbus*; but a mere list of titles of some recent works of more serious intent may be of interest.

Bundy, G. (1976) *The Birds of Libya*. Pp 102. Brit. Orn. Union, London.

Benson, C.W. & Benson, F.M. (1977) *The Birds of Malawi*. Pp 263. Limbe, Malawi.

Cramp & Simmons (1977-) *Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa: The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Vol. I (1977) pp 722, Vol. II (1980) pp 695, Vol. III (1983) pp 913. Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford.

Irwin, M.P.S. (1978) *A Bibliography of the Birds of Rhodesia*. Pp 241. Rhodesian Orn. Soc., Salisbury.

Snow, D.W. (ed.) (1978) *An Atlas of Speciation in African Non-Passerine Birds*. Pp 390. Brit. Mus. Nat. Hist., London.

Newman, K. (1979) *Birdlife in Southern Africa*. Rev. ed., pp 252. Macmillan Johannesburg.

Pakenham, R.H.W. (1979) *The Birds of Zanzibar and Pemba*. Pp 134. Brit. Orn. Union, London.

Thomsen, P. & Jacobsen, P. (1979) *The Birds of Tunisia*. Pp 165. Copenhagen.

Britton, P.L. (ed.) (1980) *Birds of East Africa*. Pp 271. EANHS, Nairobi.

Brown, L.H. & Britton, P.L. (1980) *The Breeding Seasons of East African Birds*. Pp 164. EANHS, Nairobi.