The book will be instantly familiar to anyone who has seen any of Princeton’s earlier Caribbean guides, such as A guide to the birds of the West Indies by Raffaele et al. Indeed, some of the plates have been taken from that earlier guide. The book follows a standard formal, with front pieces speaking to the topography and habitats of the island (from the highest mountains in the Caribbean, at 3098 m, to the lowest lake, at 44 m below sea level), endemic species (31) and subspecies (50), avian conservation, and the island’s ornithological history. This is followed by detailed species accounts with information on similar species, vocalizations, habitat preferences, status, nesting, and global range, as well as a “comments” section containing interesting anecdotes such as the place of the bird in local culture. Each species account is accompanied by an up-to-date, detailed map of the bird’s distribution on the island. This information is complemented by 56 colour plates, most of which group up to 10 similar species however, pride of place is given to the island’s endemic species and one endemic family (Palmchat), which merit larger portraits. The book closes with descriptions of 14 birding sites and a checklist.

The species accounts are accurate and provide sufficient information to identify most species. Particular attention is paid to the resident species most likely to be of interest to visitors, thus ensuring that one is indeed able to safely differentiate Long-billed and Narrow-billed Todys, the vireos, and other potentially confusing groups. Canadian readers will find the discussion of Bicknell’s Thrush of interest as Hispaniola is the chief wintering ground of this enigmatic breeding species. In general, the treatment of migrants is better than in many other regional guides; while you might want to lug around a good North American guide for some of the shorebirds and basic plumaged warblers, the level of detail in the plates is impressive and will usually suffice (e.g. if you look closely you can see the differently marked tertials in the illustrations of Long-billed and Short-billed dowitchers). In general the plates have the rather washed out and sombre tones of the earlier Princeton guides, and in some of the portraits the feathers have a rather messy look, not unlike old museum specimens, but this is a stylistic quibble; on the whole the plates are very good. While the decision to illustrate all 306 species which have been recorded on the island has considerable merit, having three illustrations of a bird which has only occurred once (Swainson’s Hawk) would seem an inappropriate use of always scarce space.

The authors largely follow standard taxonomy, but have jumped the gun on American Ornithologists’ Union orthodoxy by accepting recently proposed revisions, such as treating the Hispaniolan Nightjar as distinct from the Cuban Nightjar, both traditionally combined as one species known as Greater Antillean Nightjar (confusingly, the latter name is used in the similar species account under Least Pauraque, one of relatively few editorial errors in the book). Similarly, the authors have abolished the names of two endemics, Green-tailed Ground-Warbler and White-winged Warbler which have now morphed into Green-tailed Ground-Tanager and Hispaniolan Highland-Tanager, respectively. Some other incipient splits and lumps are suggested in the text, reflecting the fact that yet more work needs to be done on the island. Likewise, the species accounts indicate that several species have been added to the island’s avifauna in the last decade, suggesting a recent increase in coverage and the possibility that the island’s bird list will grow: the local occurrence of several pelagic species in particular seems to be poorly known.

Who should buy this book? Someone with a general interest in Caribbean birds may be better served by A guide to the Birds of the West Indies by Raffaele et al., which covers Hispaniola along with the rest of the islands. But anyone planning to travel to this beautiful island, or with a keen interest in Caribbean ornithology, would be well advised to acquire a copy; the range maps and site guides alone are worth the price if you are planning a self-guided visit (but better still, go with one of the organizations cited in the book). Finally, and most importantly, there should be a copy in every school and public library on the island: one hopes that Spanish and French versions are in the works.

Mark Gawn
Mission of Canada, Chemin de l’Ariana 5, Geneva 1202, Switzerland

Atlas of Bird Migration – Tracing the Great Journeys of the World’s Birds

Firefly Books has come out with another decent book. They’ve claimed the target audience to be, “bird enthusiasts, naturalists and the inquiring reader” and those who “wish to comprehend the perilous voyages that constitute one of the great wonders of the natural world.” The book is written to be consumable by people in grade school and perhaps almost fully understood by those as young as 12 or 14 years of age; it will be an enjoyable, and not too taxing to read for adults who have a passing interest in the topic. Serious birders will want to go elsewhere for more in-depth descriptions of the topics.

The book starts out with 15 two-to-four page chapters on the biology and environmental conditions of migration, including timing, flight styles, genetics and weather. For the most part, these are well-illustrated
Handbook of the Birds of the World Volume II – Old World Flycatchers to Old World Warblers
easier to recognise birds like the Common Jery of Madagascar and the long-billed Tailor Bird of Asia can be a problem. They are so active that critical characteristics can be hard to see. Whenever you think you have seen all the relevant characteristics, after the bird has flown, you often discover there was something critical you missed!
The 270 species of Old World Warblers in the Sylviidae (with 14 species confined to the antique island of Madagascar) are mostly LBJs. They are some of the most difficult birds to identify in the field. This nightmare is composed of several genera with hyphenated names like bush-warbler, reed-warbler, leaf-warbler and swamp-warbler. While there are discernable differences between, say, leaf- and swamp-warblers within each group there are many look-alike species which vary only by minuscule differences in eye-stripe or bill length. I spent every lunch hour for two weeks beside a Willow Warbler’s nest so that I could identify this species with confidence. This meant I could better see a Willow Warbler’s nest so that I could identify this species with confidence. This meant I could better see the subtle difference between Willow Warblers and Chiffchafs [greener versus browner, etc.]. Unfortunately these birds are variable. The reader need only compare the photo of a pale, greyish Willow Warbler on page 551 with the brownish-yellow one on page 514 to understand this difficulty. It gets even worse with birds like the newly split Booted Warbler [Hippolais caligata] and Syke’s Warbler [H. rama] Syke’s Warbler winters all over India whereas H. caligata is found only on the eastern coast between the Ganges and Pondicherry. So the two species overlap in the east and are almost identical. As they do not sing in winter it will take a DNA test to separate them!
So how did Handbook of the Birds of the World. Volume II fare in dealing with birds that are not as magnificent as albatross or wildly coloured like parrots? It actually does remarkably well. Once again we have a well-organized and researched volume that adds to the

2006

SYNOPSIS

Handbook of the Birds of the World Volume II – Old World Flycatchers to Old World Warblers


Handbook of the Birds of the World, Volume II covers eight families containing 733 species each with its own account and distribution map. The first of these is the Old World Flycatchers which, with the prejudices of youth, conjure up visions of Little Brown Jobs (LBJs). LBJs are the birders bane; small obscure birds that are difficult to see and identify. My first encounter with an Old World Flycatcher was the Spotted Flycatcher. This is an LBJ where “spotted” is an overstatement. They are only faint marks on the breast. This is a sweeping and somewhat unfair assessment as more than 40 percent of Old World Flycatchers are colour-ful. Indeed, the 22 members of Cyrrus are as colourful as North American Bluebirds.

In the next family, the Batises are small and largely black-and-white, whereas Wattle-eyes are somewhat more colourful with some orange and yellow. Many of the Monarch-flycatchers which, with the prejudices of youth, conjure up visions of Little Brown Jobs (LBJs). LBJs are the birders bane; small obscure birds that are difficult to see and identify. My first encounter with an Old World Flycatcher was the Spotted Flycatcher. This is an LBJ where “spotted” is an overstatement. They are only faint marks on the breast. This is a sweeping and somewhat unfair assessment as more than 40 percent of Old World Flycatchers are colour-ful. Indeed, the 22 members of Cyrrus are as colourful as North American Bluebirds.

In the next family, the Batises are small and largely black-and-white, whereas Wattle-eyes are somewhat more colourful with some orange and yellow. Many of the Monarch-flycatchers which, with the prejudices of youth, conjure up visions of Little Brown Jobs (LBJs). LBJs are the birders bane; small obscure birds that are difficult to see and identify. My first encounter with an Old World Flycatcher was the Spotted Flycatcher. This is an LBJ where “spotted” is an overstatement. They are only faint marks on the breast. This is a sweeping and somewhat unfair assessment as more than 40 percent of Old World Flycatchers are colour-ful. Indeed, the 22 members of Cyrrus are as colourful as North American Bluebirds.

In the next family, the Batises are small and largely black-and-white, whereas Wattle-eyes are somewhat more colourful with some orange and yellow. Many of the Monarch-flycatchers which, with the prejudices of youth, conjure up visions of Little Brown Jobs (LBJs). LBJs are the birders bane; small obscure birds that are difficult to see and identify. My first encounter with an Old World Flycatcher was the Spotted Flycatcher. This is an LBJ where “spotted” is an overstatement. They are only faint marks on the breast. This is a sweeping and somewhat unfair assessment as more than 40 percent of Old World Flycatchers are colour-ful. Indeed, the 22 members of Cyrrus are as colourful as North American Bluebirds.

In the next family, the Batises are small and largely black-and-white, whereas Wattle-eyes are somewhat more colourful with some orange and yellow. Many of the Monarch-flycatchers which, with the prejudices of youth, conjure up visions of Little Brown Jobs (LBJs). LBJs are the birders bane; small obscure birds that are difficult to see and identify. My first encounter with an Old World Flycatcher was the Spotted Flycatcher. This is an LBJ where “spotted” is an overstatement. They are only faint marks on the breast. This is a sweeping and somewhat unfair assessment as more than 40 percent of Old World Flycatchers are colour-ful. Indeed, the 22 members of Cyrrus are as colourful as North American Bluebirds.

In the next family, the Batises are small and largely black-and-white, whereas Wattle-eyes are somewhat more colourful with some orange and yellow. Many of the Monarch-flycatchers which, with the prejudices of youth, conjure up visions of Little Brown Jobs (LBJs). LBJs are the birders bane; small obscure birds that are difficult to see and identify. My first encounter with an Old World Flycatcher was the Spotted Flycatcher. This is an LBJ where “spotted” is an overstatement. They are only faint marks on the breast. This is a sweeping and somewhat unfair assessment as more than 40 percent of Old World Flycatchers are colour-ful. Indeed, the 22 members of Cyrrus are as colourful as North American Bluebirds.

In the next family, the Batises are small and largely black-and-white, whereas Wattle-eyes are somewhat more colourful with some orange and yellow. Many of the Monarch-flycatchers which, with the prejudices of youth, conjure up visions of Little Brown Jobs (LBJs). LBJs are the birders bane; small obscure birds that are difficult to see and identify. My first encounter with an Old World Flycatcher was the Spotted Flycatcher. This is an LBJ where “spotted” is an overstatement. They are only faint marks on the breast. This is a sweeping and somewhat unfair assessment as more than 40 percent of Old World Flycatchers are colour-ful. Indeed, the 22 members of Cyrrus are as colourful as North American Bluebirds.

In the next family, the Batises are small and largely black-and-white, whereas Wattle-eyes are somewhat more colourful with some orange and yellow. Many of the Monarch-flycatchers which, with the prejudices of youth, conjure up visions of Little Brown Jobs (LBJs). LBJs are the birders bane; small obscure birds that are difficult to see and identify. My first encounter with an Old World Flycatcher was the Spotted Flycatcher. This is an LBJ where “spotted” is an overstatement. They are only faint marks on the breast. This is a sweeping and somewhat unfair assessment as more than 40 percent of Old World Flycatchers are colour-ful. Indeed, the 22 members of Cyrrus are as colourful as North American Bluebirds.