

included, first as appendices then in the body of the text. Better, more accurate illustrations with more and more detail became the standard.

I was never a fan of photos. They show a bird in one pose, one light, one plumage and one state of health. A good artist can smooth out all the individual variations to produce a “typical” looking bird. In the last few years some guides have used computer-manipulated photos that do what the artist does to create a useable illustration.

Crossley’s guide has good range maps and clear text, often with a hint of humour. But do not buy this book for the writing; buy it for the photographs. The author has taken a typical habitat photo as background and super-imposed multiple images of a single species. By careful positioning he has produced a remarkable three dimensional image. It is not totally true to life because I might to see a large flock of Snow Buntings, but I never expect to see a flock of Barn Owls. The result is more like looking at a museum diorama of perfectly mounted specimens.

Each species occupies from a quarter to a full page. The ones on a full page tend to be the more common species, at least in some part of the continent. Some very common birds, however, are relegated to less than a page. The abundant Glaucus-winged Gull gets only one third of a page, whereas the rare Kirtland’s Warbler covers half a page. Each page is normally “pure” – that is only one species is shown. In a few cases some bird [and even the odd human] has sneaked into the background. I rather like the partially-hidden Green Jay behind the Plain Chacalacas. If you look there are adults, juveniles, males and females, winter and summer plumages as appropriate. And you must look carefully. I saw six birds the first time I glimpsed the Willow Flycatcher page, the second time I realized there were eight birds shown and the third time I found nine.

Indeed many species are depicted disappearing into the background, just as they do in real life.

Many times you will hear experienced birders say this looks like a good spot for a particular species. By recognizing key habitat conditions you can calculate what birds might be expected. Knowing what to look for is a huge help in being prepared to identify whatever flits into view. Crossley’s new style photographs give an excellent insight into habitat. Time and again I found myself thinking that I had seen that species in those surroundings.

I normally suggest novice birders stick to RTP’s classic for the first two years. Its simplified illustrations and lack of confusing plumages make it easier for a new birder to get started. After some experience a person can move on to the more detailed and modern of guides. In future I will be recommending birders buy two guides; the 500 gm [1 lb] RTP guide to carry with them in the field and the 1600 gm [3lb 8 oz] Crossley guide to have in the car. If, for no other reason, this is the best book to learn a bird’s habitat requirements – an important part of bird finding and identification. This guide also provides a method of comparing various plumages to birds seen in the field.

Did I find any errors? There were a few things I noted, but they were so insignificant that they are not worth mentioning. Enjoy this book for its positive aspects.

This innovative new guide is a must buy for all birders. The three-dimensional effect alone is worth the price as it really takes you back in to the field. The photo-edited bird illustrations are as good as artists renderings. Do not wait for your birthday, buy it and use it now.

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Handbook of the Birds of the World. Volume 15. Weavers to New World Warblers

By Josep del Hoyo, Andrew Elliott, and David A. Christie (Editors). 2008. Lynx Edicions, Montseny, 8, 08193 Bellaterra, Barcelona, Spain. 879 pages. €215 EUR Cloth.

It is amazing to think what an epic began when I bought Volume 1 Handbook of the Birds of the World [1992]. Now, 19 years later, I have Volume 15 – the penultimate tome. Only one more volume to come in 2012 [covering Tanagers, Cardinals, Buntings and Blackbirds]. This issue, Volume 15, deals with Weavers, Wydahs and Indigobirds, Waxbills, Vireos, Finches, Hawaiian Honeycreepers, Olive Warbler and New World Warblers. As usual the format, the artwork and photographs are excellent.

Weavers are the bright, colourful sparrow-sized birds that build large colonial nests. Some of the species have given me problems in the past as, many are yellow bodied with black faces. While it is easy to see the dif-

ferences between species in illustrations, I have found it much trickier in the field. The other confusion I have had is separating wydahs from widowbirds. Bird lists from trip reports and other sources often use these names interchangeably. Now there is one reference that put these species into a clear perspective. The high quality photographs allow the reader to compare the artwork to a real bird.

Waxbills are familiar birds in the pet trade, providing aviculturist with a large number and variety of colourful animals. They have rounded heads and large dark eyes, which makes them look cute. When I plan a trip to another country I usually visit a couple of pet stores to study their collection of birds. Typically

there are several cages of birds from the waxbill family. Their names, firetail, parrotfinch and firefinch, evoke their arresting colours, and HBW 15 has page after beautifully-painted page of these little birds.

In this company the poor vireos look dowdy. Most of the 52 species are small greeny-grey birds that give many birders identification problems. Fortunately the Finches are another large group of colourful, entertaining birds. I have rarely been in a locality where I did not see at least one pretty, little finch species. While many cause excitement amongst birders in one locality, it is not because the bird is rare, but because they wander from other localities. Redpolls, crossbills, chaffinches and rosy finches can all cause hearts to flutter in some parts of the world.

The chapter on Hawaiian Honeycreepers is rather sad. All of these species are colourful, mostly red or yellow, and with interesting profiles. Of the 40 or so original species 16 to 19 are extinct, a poor reflection on human stewardship of those lovely islands. The photos and plates evoke the magic of the Pacific and somewhat offset "the relationship [being] ... one of tragedy."

The enigmatic Olive Warbler has bounced around genera and now sits as a single species in *Peucedramus*. The taxonomist dilemma notwithstanding, it is an attractive bird sought after by visitors to the southern United States and Mexico.

The final group are the misnamed New World Warblers. [I prefer the Canadian French *Paruline* – Yellow-rumped Paruline even *Parula* Paruline sounds fine to me]. In summer plumage at least, this is another collection of attractively-coloured birds. The "warblers" have many ardent fans in North America and I am certain these people will be pleased by HBW 15's coverage.

In addition to the excellent illustrations there is an equally excellent text. I was amused to find that even HBW has some complications with taxonomists, and

this has resulted in extra half-plate. The descriptions plainly show the differences in eastern and western populations of Warbling Vireos, the stronger colouration of the green morph Pine Siskins [sometimes confused with "Vagrant" Eurasian Siskins in North America], the separation of indigo birds in Africa and the hard-to-separate redpolls. The polymorphic Red-billed Quelea has three full illustrations and an extra the male heads while the text expertly covers its wide variability. The status, conservation and distribution is dealt with generically in the introductory passages and specifically for each species. For example, the now, widespread distribution of the Common Waxbill is referenced, but only the native range is shown on the map.

The Foreword was an essay on the Conservation of the World's Birds. It is a well researched, informative and thoroughly illustrated by charts and graphs. It gives any reader a clear, if depressing, overview of the status of all birds. Naturally the author concentrates on species at risk, but there is sufficient data to show where all the bird populations are headed. While many issues will be known to avid birders I am sure we can all learn something new. I did; I did not realise people were poisoning vulture so these birds did not give away their poaching activities. However, I think the essay's real value is how it focusses all the individual problems [loss of albatross to long-lining, tropical forest destruction for soya beans, the impact of cats etc.] into a coherent whole.

Overall this is another superb addition to this vast reference work. I repeatedly go back to older editions to resolve numerous issues and this volume will join those ranks. This is a book for every serious birder and researcher.

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Natural History. The Ultimate Visual Guide to Everything on Earth

By Becky Alexander. 2010. Smithsonian/Dorling Kindersley, Tourmaline Editions Inc., 662 King Street West, Suite 304, Toronto, Ontario M5V 1M7. 648 pages. \$55.00 CAD Cloth.

Some time ago I loaned one of my favourite books [The Natural History of Europe. By Harry Gams. 1967. Paul Hamlyn Ltd., London.] to a friend. It is an old, illustrated guide to the birds, mammals, reptiles, plants etc. While this may, as a collection of allsorts, not be a book for the purist, but I have found it very useful on my trips to Europe. The species illustrated are the commoner ones; those you are most likely to see on a short trip.

Natural History claims to be the ultimate visual guide to everything on earth – a profound claim! Will this do the same thing for the world as my old book does for Europe? The book covers rocks, plants, animals and the species in between. In 648 pages it cannot go into

great detail, but only achieve an understanding of the basics. So how well does it do?

It does it very well. The book is logically and clearly organized into rocks, minerals, fossils and the domains, kingdoms, phyla or divisions, classes, orders, and families of the living world. As in every DK book I have read, the illustrations are beautiful; whether this is an Amoeba or a Bird of Paradise. From about five to a dozen species are shown on each page. They are photographs, stripped of the background and placed on the white page. This is a good way to show the species characteristics. It is illuminating to see in this way those species we do not normally see well [fish, worms and parasites].