

Book Reviews

ZOOLOGY

Birds of Azerbaijan

By Michael Patrikeev. 2004. Pensoft Publishers, Geo Milev Street 13a, 1111 Sofia, Bulgaria. 500 pages, U.S. \$177.50 Cloth.

Several years ago I took a small map and shaded the countries for which you could purchase a good bird guide. There were two key gaps. One zone ran from eastern Turkey to Afghanistan (and the other was Brazil). The best books you could get for this former region (the Caucasus) was the *Birds of Russia* by Flint Boehme, Kostin and Kuznetsor or *Birds of the Soviet Union* by Dementiev and Gladkov (both nearly 50 years old). This new book covers the 372 species that have been recorded in the Republic of Azerbaijan and fills in some of that area with poor coverage.

Azerbaijan lies on the western shore of the Caspian Sea, to the north of Iran and east of Turkey. A southern section of Armenia clips off a small enclave called Noxçivan. It has a varied topography with the consequent diversity of bird species. This book covers this troubled region. There were wars in the 1800s with imperial Russia, civil war between 1917-1920, attacks by the Turks from the 1950s onwards, and still the area has an ongoing dispute with neighbouring Armenia. The struggles, along with changing economic and political status has led to some discontinuity in the study of birds. Separation from the USSR in 1991 lost the services of the Russian science community and this lack of continuous research shows in the data cited. Much of the information used by the author is from before the mid-1990s. There are some later references, but these are much fewer. Separation from the former USSR also caused economic difficulties from which the country has yet to emerge.

Birds of Azerbaijan is a distributional atlas, not a field guide. The author has compiled data from a large variety of sources, much from the "Russian" era. For example the data on Mallard is primarily prior to 1996. [We have seen with our work on the *Breeding Bird Atlas of Ontario* what an amazing difference a gap of ten years in the data can make]. The author has added his own extensive observations taken between 1970

and 1991. The story is quite gloomy. For example, many thousands of Red-breasted Geese were seen in the 1950s, but the species is considered virtually extinct now. Even the Eurasian Coot has dropped from millions to tens of thousands. The reasons for these changes include severe air, soil, and water pollution. Soil pollution results from oil spills, DDT and defoliants used in the production of cotton, making the Caspian Sea one the most ecologically degraded area in the world. Less gloomy, but equally distressing is the lack of current information on some species, for example Red Kite.

It is against this background that the author has done a sterling job of pulling the known information on this country's birds into a logical, readable text. Each species account has status, distribution, population size, migratory movements, breeding information, diet and mortality. The English names are used throughout, while Azaeri names are added for many species. A respectfully-sized distribution map has codes for summer, winter, nesting, etc. for most species. The author gives an annotated bird list and describes important bird areas, places for colonial birds, waterfowl wintering areas, and the influence of cold winters and oil pollution. There are 78 photographs, of which one third show habitat, one third are bird photos and the rest are of eggs and nests. The habitat photographs show the nine basic types of landscapes from alpine meadows in mountains to semi-desert and wetland. But he does not illustrate the rust and mauve mountains of the Caucasus located in the troubled Naxçivan Autonomous District nor of any arid badlands. There is not full coverage of the 50 Important Bird Areas identified by the author.

Given the way the Azaeri economy has languished as regional trade has suffered and the underdeveloped oil production has yet to fulfill its promise, this book may be a very important milestone in a continuing tragic ornithological history.

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Birds of New Brunswick: An Annotated List

By David S. Christie, Brian E. Dalzell, Marcel David, Robert Doiron, Donald G. Gibson, Mike H. Lushington, Peter A. Pearce, Stuart I. Tingley, and James G. Wilson. 2004. New Brunswick Museum Monographic Series (Natural Science) Number 10, 277 Douglas Avenue, Saint John,

New Brunswick, E2K 1E5. 2004. 83 pages. [Also available in French.]

This publication appeared in the same series as the two previous summaries (hereafter "lists") of bird status

in New Brunswick (Squires 1952, 1976), and seems to serve essentially the same purpose, to update the provincial bird list and the status of each species. This review considers the new publication's success in achieving its purpose, whether viewed only as an update of the earlier lists, or as state-of-the-art representation of each bird species' status in New Brunswick.

The subtitle "An annotated list" implies that this publication was planned as a less ambitious publication than its predecessors, but that may be a quibble. The earlier books were also annotated lists, though including more descriptive "front material" and fairly extensive bibliographies. The new species accounts generally are shorter than those in the earlier lists, omitting most place-names and dates – except for species known from very few records. Presumably that reflected more complete perspective on status than was available earlier, as might be expected; given 30 years' additional data, and their consideration by a panel of authors drawn from most parts of the province, it may have been redundant to document *in detail* the distribution of each species, many of which occur regularly in all or most of the 15 counties.

Considered only as an updated provincial list, with status assessed from existing, largely unstandardized data, I judge that this publication will serve most of its immediate objectives adequately. Birders will be able to find out whether a scarce species has been reported previously in New Brunswick and, if so, where and how many times. They also can obtain an idea, in very general terms, of how common a regular species is, across the province and in the seasons when it is to be expected.

Scientists seeking potential study areas may be dissatisfied with the scarcity of specific locations and of distributional limits within the province. Few "hot-spots" are identified except for very scarce species. Admittedly, scientists "from away" probably also had difficulty extracting such information from the earlier lists, owing to far greater gaps in knowledge then.

The introduction makes it clear that the present list, longer by 61 species than its 1976 predecessor, grew by addition largely of vagrants (= "lost birds"). Some new species had expanded their ranges, but very few of those – Mourning Dove the most obvious example – breed widely in New Brunswick as yet. Only two species were stated to have declined drastically, though other declines were noted in species accounts; my recent experience (quite limited geographically) suggested that some other declines may be as significant as those highlighted in the Introduction.

Perhaps a more important question emerging from review of this publication is whether its format was suitable for presenting status of all species **representatively**, even if we acknowledge that complete information will never be available? Status involves frequency of encounter and density, as well as distribution. Most observational effort by birders is notoriously uneven, focusing on "hot-spots" and easily accessi-

ble areas – and on misplaced species. Is it reasonable to accept that data from such efforts provide the best picture available on bird status?

The status of many *breeding* birds in New Brunswick was presented, probably more representatively (up to that time), in the maps and population estimates of the Maritimes Atlas (Erskine 1992). From the start of that (breeding) Atlas project, it was recognized that the major increases in perspective would emerge for species that were neither everywhere nor with very restricted breeding ranges – and that was found to be so. Although "abundance indices" were assessed for most species, and extrapolated to total breeding populations for many of them, no attempt has been made – as yet – to map relative densities of breeding species within New Brunswick from Atlas data. That would be essential for representative assessment of status, and it may soon become possible using "point-count" data to be collected in the second-generation bird atlas in the Maritimes (now in planning) [that in Ontario is nearing completion]. Breeding species make up most of the provincial list of *regularly occurring birds*, and Atlas data should be preferred over even up-to-date annotated lists by most scientists and many birders.

The Atlas mapping approach reduced unsampled areas greatly – though not completely. It could be used effectively only during breeding and wintering seasons, when birds are fairly sedentary. As yet, no bird atlas coverage is available in the Maritimes for winter or migration seasons – except for seabirds (which may not provide a model useful for other species). Many (uncompiled) data exist for other regular species in other seasons; although most were collected unsystematically and with no attempt at comprehensive coverage, it would be possible to produce maps for occurrence and frequency of wintering and migrating birds – in this and nearby provinces – that would improve greatly on the rather subjective status assessments available in check-list form. Until that is done, annotated lists may be the only readily available summaries of bird status in non-breeding seasons, including most occurrences of "displaced birds".

The new list of New Brunswick birds is a neat, compact publication, with a sturdy "ring" binding and attractive cover pictures. The front cover features an Evening Grosbeak, a colourful and conspicuous species that often dominated the New Brunswick bird scene in the 1970s – but that, in the past decade, has almost disappeared from southeast New Brunswick.

References:

- Erskine, A. J. 1992. Atlas of breeding birds of the Maritime Provinces. Nova Scotia Museum and Nimbus Publishing. x + 270 pages.
- Squires, W. A. 1952. The birds of New Brunswick. Monographic Series (4). New Brunswick Museum, Saint John. 164 pages.
- Squires, W. A. 1976. The birds of New Brunswick (Second edition). Monographic Series (7). New Brunswick Museum, Saint John. 221 pages.

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