

## **The World's Rarest Birds**

By Erik Hirschfeld, Andy Swash and Robert Still. 2013. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, NJ, USA, 08540-5237. 360 pages, 45.00 USD, Cloth.

This book is a delight and a distress. I expected to find accounts of species I had searched for knowing their rarity. Birds such as Whooping Crane, Bengal Florican, Red-breasted Goose and Brown Kiwi to name a few. Imagine my dismay at seeing a photo of a Eurasian Turtle Dove in the first few pages. This was a bird I saw often in my youth and associated its

soft purring with warm, sunny days. Last March I did not see any in the UK, but assumed (correctly) I was too early. It seems as though this bird is in trouble, having lost 60% of its world population (The RSPB recently quoted a 93% loss for the UK). The Black-browed Albatross was another surprise, until I looked at my notes. On trips south I saw several thousand ten

years ago, a year ago it was a couple of hundred and this year it was 70. While only anecdotal, it is a dramatic change.

So this book is a snapshot of the most recent status of 590 bird species. It is organised, more or less, by continent (Europe and the Middle East; Africa and Madagascar; Asia; Australasia; Oceanic Islands; North America, Central America, and the Caribbean; and South America. ). Antarctica is not covered, but Oceania is. Each species has coverage in all the continents where it occurs. So Black-browed Albatross has an entry in the pages on Australasia, the Oceanic Islands and South America. Each species gets coverage of distribution, status, population, key threats, and conservation needs. Birds that appear more than once have a different picture accompanying the write-up.

The text is focussed on the status in each specific region. Each entry has a QR code (abbreviated from Quick Response Code) that can be read by an imaging device, such as a camera or a smartphone (with Android operating system and iOS devices [iPhone/iPod/iPad]) with a QR app. This will access BirdLife International's annually updated website. The authors have included a range map, but these can be hard to read. For example, the maps for the Madagascar Pond-heron and the Amber Mountain Rock Thrush are the same scale. This means the range for the thrush is a tiny dot while the pond-heron's larger distribution is more obvious. The range of the Madagascar Ibis along the west coast of the island is particularly difficult to see. The range maps at BirdLife International's website are far more detailed.

Between the species texts are essays on a variety of topics, such as the Amazon Basin and the special plight of albatrosses, vultures or bustards. There are summaries of the key issues in each region, especially the vulnerable islands (e.g. the Galapagos, New Caledonia, Hawaii etc). Less usual are accounts of the world's most threatened flyway and grassland management.

The photographs in this book are remarkable. Most are not of birds in spectacular positions – displaying, feeding chicks and the like – but are portraits, a more suitable pose for this book. Birds are shown perched, standing or flying in postures an observer would likely see in the field. They are photographs worthy of Yousuf Karsh, that master of human portraits of states-

men, artists, scientists, and other humans of renown. When I look at my attempts this year to photograph Brown Kiwi or Yellow-eyed Penguin I can appreciate the amazing quality of these photographs. The authors got these lovely pieces of art in a novel way – they ran an international photography competition. This gave them a choice of over 3,500 images for all but 76 of the target species. For these latter birds they engaged Tomasz Cofta to paint illustrations. For a species like the beautiful Bates Weaver, last seen in 1998, Cofta has produced a stunning portrait that fits well with all the photographs on the page.

Photographs are also used as a compliment to the essay text. This is achieved as inserts, backgrounds, margins and full page features. The result is a book that could pass as a coffee-table tome. But this is far more than a picture book. Yet I do not recommend you read this book as it can be very depressing. Too many of the birds that excite us are in sad and serious trouble. I soon found I was grabbing the book to look up a burning question which led to more questions and more reading. Then I would take a rest. Clearly it is a great reference that will unfortunately become dated in a horrifyingly short time.

While I was upset by a number of birds that have reached a critical status, I was surprised that some species were not included. I spent some time chasing Saint Vincent Parrot (an island species, population less than 1000 in an area of 389 km<sup>2</sup>) that only reaches Vulnerable status. I read through the thresholds for IUCN Red Listing and I am still unclear why this bird does not have a “higher” status leading to a more concerted conservation effort. The other bird that came to mind was the (New Zealand) Saddleback (population about 7000), but the South Island form has gone from a low of 36 to a current 700.

Despite its message this is a wonderful book. It will be an essential resource for serious ornithologists and researchers involved in conservation. There is a cadre of wealthy, travelling listers who will find the information in this book essential in their pursuit of new ticks. Bird photographers will love the photos and Cofta's reputation will surely rise.

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