

The Crossley ID Guide to Britain and Ireland

By Richard Crossley, and Dominic Couzens. 2013. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey, 08540-5237 USA. 304 pages, 27.95 USD, Paper.

I have to admit to a positive bias for Crossley's method of illustration. I know others find the crammed pictures confusing and distracting. But you never see a bird facing right against a plain white background. Well maybe a Shorelark (Horned Lark) on fresh snow is a possibility. Crossley takes computer-manipulated photographs of birds, mounted on to a typical background. This illustration looks like a jigsaw puzzle, with several examples of the species in question dotted throughout the habitat. Most common species have a full page, while the rarer birds have half or a quarter of a page. The author does not follow the current taxonomic order so, for example, all the waterbirds are in sequence. This is a very sensible approach and far more valuable in the field.

My copy arrived a week before I left for England. So I avidly used it to review species I was likely to see. I reminded myself of the difference between Rooks and Carrion Crows. I read through the key points separating Willow and Marsh Tits. I read that Marsh Tit is "One of the worst named birds ..." as it prefers deciduous damp woodland – not marshes. The Willow Tit likes scrubby bushes around lakes and that does include willows.

Rather than being put off by the illustrations I found them particularly charming. Swallows (Barn Swallows to us) are shown in a typical farmyard; bright birds against cold, grey stone. There is a quaint flower-filled village as the background for Blackbird and typical churchyard for the iconic (Eurasian) Robin. While the Marsh Tit flits in its woodland but the Bearded Tit is in a marsh.

In Britain I visited Greenwich, Dulwich, Hampton court, Kensington Gardens and Hampton court. I was amazed to realise that after four days I had made sev-

eral sightings of Rose-ringed Parakeets and yet I had not seen a single House Sparrow. Crossley gives the current estimate of populations where available. For the parakeets he quotes 8,600 pairs, while the sparrows rank at 5.3 million pairs. I eventually saw 20 House Sparrows near Lincoln.

There are other species included that add to the sense of the habitat and give a more rounded idea of the species environment. For example, there is a man raising his arm in defence against Great Skuas. A Badger peeks out from the trees holding Tawny Owls. A Eurasian Red Squirrel, that shares the same limited distribution, adds to the Crested Tit page.

Last week a friend sent a photo of a flock of Common Redshank with their bright coral "shanks" with a slightly smaller yellow-legged bird in the centre. It was one of the over 250 records for Lesser Yellowlegs for the UK. This species does not make it into this book. It covers about 300 out of 596 species on the official British record. Regularly occurring rarities that arrive every year, but in very small numbers are covered, but the more sporadic vagrants are not. As such this guide is more useful to new birders and occasional visitors. Indeed the introduction provides an excellent approach for the new birdwatcher. There are many practical examples of what to do in the field to get the best out of this guide.

So I recommend this book as a first guide for beginners. You can move on to a more comprehensive guide after a couple of year's experience. Visitors will get an introduction to both the birds and the countryside of the British Isles.

ROY JOHN

2193 Emard Crescent, Ottawa, Ontario K1J 6K5 Canada