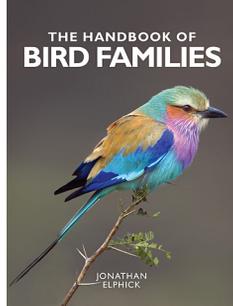


ORNITHOLOGY

The Handbook of Bird Families

By Jonathan Elphick. 2018. Firefly Books and The Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London. 416 pages, 35.00 CAD, Paper.

As most people with more than a slight interest in birds understand, the taxonomy of Aves is at present in flux. Much of the changing taxonomic attribution is a consequence of molecular DNA research. The best thing that may be said about this book is that, published in 2018, it has the most up-to-date presentation of what is



understood about avian taxonomic relationships outside of scientific journals. The first thing one notices by thumbing through the book is that it is rather dense with very little white space and a small font. It would seem that reducing publication cost has driven the layout and presentation.

In the two-page introduction, Elphick briefly explains the scientific classification system. In defining families, he follows the arrangement of the fourth edition of *The Howard and Moore Complete Checklist of the Birds of the World* (Aves Press, 2013/2014) and notes that this is a conservative approach. He indicates here there are 36 orders and 234 families of birds by latest account.

The Table of Contents under the heading “The Bird Families” lists 36 orders but, curiously, lists no families. The main text offers a brief explanation of each order followed by the families in that order. Each family is then given a box in which the same basic information is covered, such as: social behaviour, nest, food, voice, and migration. Because the information, in some cases, may cover dozens of genera and hundreds of species I did not find it particularly useful. In fact, the author is often reduced to stating that species vary hugely in these regards.

Under the heading “Conservation Status” he lists the names of those species that are at the highest categories of threat and then, for the less threatened categories, just the number of species in each. There is an appendix in which the definitions of the Birdlife/IUCN Red List categories are presented, but I wish the author, who stated his goal to make this book an accessible presentation, had paraphrased the definitions which, in their original form, are anything but easy to understand.

Following the “quick box” the author provides accounts that vary in length usually depending on

the size of the family. The most relevant informative parts of these accounts are the explanations of taxonomic relationships within the family and comparisons to other closely related families. In the past few years, many species have been moved from one family to another, or in some cases to a brand-new family. Many of the new groupings based as they are on DNA evidence will seem counter-intuitive to birders. The author explains that convergent evolution may produce similar appearing birds that are in quite different families.

Within these accounts are numerous interesting facts that the author has gleaned from his own studies and from the literature. However, as this book is an attempt to provide an easy-to-understand presentation of the classification of bird families, I would have preferred that it stuck to those aspects and left behavioural anecdotes to other books.

So, sticking to taxonomy, the world birder will be fascinated in some cases and perplexed in others about the arrangement and composition of families. Here are a few examples in no particular order that astonished me:

- The rail-babbler of southeast Asia is no longer a monotypic family but is now in the family Eupetidae along with the two rockfowl of West Africa and the two rockjumpers of southern Africa.
- The Wrenthrush and the two Cuban *Teretistris* warblers are lumped into the family Zeledonidae.
- The once huge family Sylviidae or “Old World Warblers” continues to be disassembled and, at present, contains 62 species and is “often referred to as the sylviid babblers” (p. 359). In fact, there are only five species in the once large genus, *Sylvia*. If you hear reference to Juniper Babbler note that it is what you knew as the Abyssinian Catbird (personally I find any taxon with the appellation Abyssinian to be exotic beyond words). It is difficult to believe that the distinctive Asian parrotbills will not soon again be split off from the other sylviids.
- Bird family seekers who made the trek to Kuwait to tick the Hypocolius family may be dismayed to find that *Hylocitrea* of far-off Sulawesi (one or two species depending on your authority) has been added to the family. It may not remain this way.

To harp on the author's goal of producing an accessible account of families, his decision to not include a representative photograph of each family is a major flaw. Better to dispense with word descriptions and include an image for each family and a photo of distinctively different species within a family such as rockjumper and rail-babbler. I counted at least 11 families with no photo and other highly distinctive and well-known groups within families that would have greatly benefitted from a photo.

The photos are generally good. Picture credits are listed at the end in a tiny print format. I much prefer the photographer to be noted in the caption; this could have been done by reducing the banal captions.

I found numerous errors that might have been detected by better editing. Here are a few examples:

- On p. 160 the order Piciformes is said to comprise four families but then (correctly) five are listed.
- On p. 173 the monotypic Cuckoo Roller is listed as being in one of the families in the order Coraciiformes, whereas earlier on p. 149 it is assigned a unique order, Leptosomiiformes, the latter acknowledged to be the correct positioning.
- Two species of Crescentchesters (*Melanopareiidae*) are described to “inhabit very large areas in east central and central *North America*” (p. 220, italics mine).
- Within the account on Antpittas (*Grallariidae*) on p. 222, “ant-thrushes are in the new Family *Grallariidae*”. Replace “ant-thrushes” with “antpittas” for this sentence to make any sense.
- On p. 349 the exact same sentence is used twice within the same paragraph to describe the appearance of Cupwings (*Pnoepygidae*), an error that could easily be picked up by editing.
- On p. 362 Elphick refers to “the renowned British nineteenth century ornithologist” but does not name him.
- On p. 368 the Palmchat (*Dulidae*) is described as one of only two families endemic to the Caribbean, the other being *Todidae*, thus forgetting the Warbler Tanagers (*Phaenicophiliidae*) described on pp. 317–318, all nine species of which are found only in the Caribbean.

In summary, this book provides a 2018 snapshot of ornithological thinking about world bird families. Unfortunately, in this reviewer's opinion the work cut too many corners perhaps based on space and time restrictions. At 35.00 CAD it is likely worth the cost but the *Bird Families of the World* (Lynx Edicions, 2015), while slightly older and thus not as up-to-date as the present volume, would still be a better purchase at 87 Euros for most birders seriously interested in bird families.

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