

A Guide to the Mammals of China

Edited by A. Smith and Y. Xie. 2008. Princeton University Press 41, William Street, Princeton, New Jersey USA 08540-5237. 576 pages. 60.00 USD Cloth.

China, like many other areas outside North America and Europe, has had good field guides to the birds for some years. Finally it now has a decent guide to the mammals. Unlike the mammal guides for Africa and South America, this new Chinese book includes a more thorough coverage of the small stuff, such as rodents, pikas, shrews and the like.

It was produced with contributions from nine people from the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, and China. It is refreshing to see such a cooperative effort by a multi-national team in a region where politics often clash. The book covers all of China, including Taiwan and Xizang [Tibet].

The artwork is by Federico Gemma of Italy and is top quality. I am particularly impressed by the way he has occasionally moved away from the “classic” guide poses. For example, he portrays Tibetan Gazelle leaping through the air. This accentuates the gracefulness of this lovely species. At first it may appear that Gemma has an easy job because so little is known of Chinese mammals in the west. This is not true. We are familiar with the cute poster mammals — the Giant and Red pandas and the Tiger. Many animals are familiar zoo and park species — Muntjac [Red], Sika and Sambar Deer. Others are common species in more accessible places — Ermine, Caribou, Moose, Red Fox. Using these as a guide, the reader will soon see that the illustrations are accurate. If you want to examine the accuracy further, then you can verify details like the facial features of the Greater Horseshoe Bat. However, not all of the species are covered by this fine artwork. I estimate that a little over 67% of the 556 species are depicted [although some of the non-illustrated species are in other, readily available, books].

The book has a great introductory section covering geography, the history of mammalogy in China, and conservation. This includes some useful maps and photographs. The text consists of the typical sections on characteristics, distribution, natural history, additional comments, and status. I was pleased to find this information is current and honest. Chinese literature meant for the West often glosses over key problems. This is not the case here, and the status of the Tiger, for example, is clearly stated. The reasons for its decline are given frankly. As this book covers 81 species more than I have on my existing Chinese mammal list, I tried comparing the two. I gave up after about 150 species because there were considerable differences. Many additional species, primarily from the fringe areas of Xinjiang, Xizang and Yunnan, were included and many others were omitted. I realised many of the missing ones had been assigned a new genus name making direct comparison more difficult. I did wonder why

the Eastern Black Crested Gibbon (*Nomascus nasutus*) was not mentioned except in a list of subspecies. This is generally regarded as a full species and is considered the most endangered primate. There are a few [in the low tens] on Huinan [plus a similar number in Vietnam]. Other species like the Manchurian Zokor [*Myospalax epsilanus*] and the Chinese Scrub Vole [*Microtus irene*] are not even mentioned, yet are listed in Duff and Lawson’s Mammals of the World and other references.

In addition, there are some changed common names — Onager is called a Kulan, for example. Also only five coastal species of marine whales out of over two dozen pelagic species are included. [However an Appendix lists an additional 29 cetaceans]. Yet all five possible seals recorded, mostly as vagrants, on China’s coast are in the book. Another problem is characterized by the distribution of the Northern Birch Mouse, *Sicista betulina*, given by some authorities as being in China, but others as being absent [Including this book]. I think that all of these differences reveal the status of the taxonomy of Chinese mammals and the need to increase research. I will now use this book as the authoritative list, but will likely still consider fringe species.

The issue I have with the text is in the “characteristics” sections. The descriptions will be difficult to use in the field as there is very little comparison with like species. The descriptions are generic enough to overlap and the illustrations are similar. For example, Jerboas are very difficult to separate. I know how hard it is to see these small fast creatures [the Great Jerboa goes over 40 km/hr!] in the field. There is a key to each genus, but this is more useful for museum specimens. [In fact there were a few places where I felt strong museum overtones as opposed to field experience. However, the book is not called a *field* guide.]

In addition to re-assigning genera, the authors have split the Eurasian Moose or Elk from the North American Moose. In China there are two widely separated populations: one in Xinjiang [north west] and one in Heilongjiang [north east]. They have made this split based on the larger size, redder fur and bigger dewlap of the “American” Moose. No other reference makes this difference.

The range maps plot actual museum and other records rather than shaded estimations of current distribution. This is more precise and factual, but may not represent today’s status and may be more of a historical record. This will mean the reader will have to interpret the data carefully so as not to get a wrong impression.

I did spot a couple of errors. Savi’s Pipistrelle’s range is given as Xinjiang ... to Northern Europe. It actually is found in Greece, Italy and eastern Spain, not what I consider northern Europe. The index indicates that the Tibetan Antelope is on Plate 60 when it is depicted on Plate 57. I also question the range map of the Spotted Seal, shown with many specimens going

far inland. I would be surprised if this pack-ice loving beast would go up fresh water rivers.

Notwithstanding my comments, this is a much-needed guide and it will be indispensable for naturalists and mammalogists for years to come.

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Birds of the Saskatoon Area

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During my second encounter with the late J. Bernard Gollop in Regina some time between 1968 and 1970, the late Margaret Belcher and her sister, Mary Houston, mentioned that his planned book on the birds of the Saskatoon area would probably be the next of the esteemed Saskatchewan Natural History Society special publications to appear. Unfortunately, Bernie did not live to see it in print, but 77 authors and six editors finally brought his 1965-1988 efforts to fruition. The long gestation period produced an outstanding addition to Saskatchewan's ornithological literature.

This largest book in the series to date is also the first to be co-published [by the Saskatoon Nature Society] and is the fifth in the Manley Callin series on birds of specific areas of the province. It is jammed with information, with even the covers and fold-outs from the covers containing information [an area map, a Landsat image of the study area and a few tables]. Introductory material covers the first 68 pages of text, including publication blurbs, tables of contents, drawings, maps and photographs, a dedication to Bernie Gollop, a preface, a foreword by Farley Mowat, a poem, acknowledgments, chapters on birding aids, histories of birding in the area and of the project, a detailed chapter on habitats and other ecological influences on the local avifauna, a detailed chapter on "hot spots" [essentially a bird-finding guide], a list of "unpublished" sources [including published seasonal compilations] consulted, a list of abbreviations, a topography and a glossary. These are well illustrated with figures, maps and drawings. The bulk of the text consists of 340 species accounts in taxonomic order except for one [Prairie Warbler] that was added while the book was in late stages of production. Eight appendices, a list of references cited and indices to English and French bird names close the book.

The species accounts are preceded by a two-page introduction, explaining their contents and definitions used for seasonal occurrence, status in the area, abundance, tables of arrival and departure dates and other general information. Species accounts range in length from two paragraphs to two and a quarter pages, depending on regularity of occurrence in the area, amount of knowledge of the species' life history features in the

area, numbers banded in the area, and other factors, such as change in status, locally, provincially, and/or generally. If migratory, earliest and median spring arrival and latest and median fall departure dates are included. If banded, numbers of the species banded in the area are listed, as are numbers (if any) recovered inside and/or outside the Saskatoon bird area. If known to nest, data are included on whatever details of nesting biology, chronology, habitat and/or success are available. Remarks on population changes and their believed causes are also included if appropriate. Drawings accompany several species accounts. Current English, French and scientific names and one or more four-letter species code(s) are indicated for each species. Former English names are also indicated for several. Nineteen nesting species are listed as hosts of Brown-headed Cowbird documented in the Saskatoon area in both the cowbird and the host species accounts. Several miscellaneous observations of biological, historical or population trend interest are also mentioned, often in a "side bar" or box.

The book ends with a series of eight appendices (on annual Christmas, May Day and fall counts, local Breeding Bird Surveys, numbers of each of 79 species banded in the area, numbers of birds banded by each bander who has banded in the area, nest-box dimensions and requirements for 12 species and a list of 12 theses based on birds studied within the area), a list of references cited and indices in English and French to the first page of each species account.

This volume continues the trend of improving on the already high quality of earlier contributions in this series, using as many sources of published and unpublished sources as possible. Although some variability in style is inevitable in a book with so many authors and editors, the quality of writing and accuracy of information are high throughout. I noted a few minor grammatical deviations, but few errors or omissions of substance. The statement (page 284) that Dickcissels "continue to breed" in southern Manitoba implies regular occurrence there. While they occasionally nest there, rarely in fairly large numbers, their occurrence is irregular, often with several years between sightings (Davis et al. 2003). Minor errors include the omission of the hyphen from screech-owl (page 68), reference to Townsend's Solitaires as "thrush-sized" (page 232), implying that they are not thrushes and a few instances of species names in lower case. The vocalization of Baltimore Oriole referred as a "call" (page 291) ap-