

Nightjars, Potoos, Frogmouths, Oilbird, and Owlet-nightjars of the World

By Nigel Cleere. 2010. Princeton University Press 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey, USA. 464 pages. 45.00 USD, Cloth.

Before I review this book I would like to comment on this odd group of birds – the caprimulgids. For the most part their plumage is a mixture of browns and greys. Many have white throats, wing and tail spots. Most are similar in size and shape. The combination of colour and shape makes it very difficult to “see” these birds among dead leaves and branches where they live. I once spent 40 minutes getting a group to “see” a nighthawk asleep on a branch about 20 metres away and in clear view. The word used most often is cryptic – secret, tending to conceal or camouflage.

When you get to see one, these birds have an elegant, understated beauty in their soft brown feathers. Yet they are also odd. They look somewhat like owls, but are clearly not. They also look a little reptilian. They are nocturnal or crepuscular and this, coupled with their camouflage means they are rarely seen. I worked out in a typical year I go out birdwatching at night maybe two percent of the time. I see most local owl species [the other big group of nocturnal birds] most years because they can be found roosting in trees during the day. This year I have seen over two dozen owls so far of seven species, yet only one caprimulgid sleeping in a tree.

Depending on the source there are well over 100 species of caprimulgids, this book says 135. *Handbook of Birds of the World* lists 118. Comparing this book’s list of species to other sources was difficult because the author has switched some groups of birds to new genera. For example, he has moved a large swatch of species from *Caprimulgus* to *Antrostomus*. He has also used different English names for several birds. Much of the difference in numbers is because this author recognizes several birds as full species whereas others still consider them subspecies [e.g. Little Nightjar, *Caprimulgus parvulus* and Todd’s Nightjar, *Caprimulgus (parvulus) heterurus*] Of the species listed, five are only known from a single specimen. The calls of nine species are unknown. The eggs of twenty species are undescribed. Many have not been photographed in the wild. I doubt we have heard the end of the taxonomic convolutions of this perplexing family.

Finding a book that will improve my knowledge of these enigmatic creatures was therefore wonderful. The book starts with sections on distribution, general biology and taxonomy. Bulk of the book is devoted

to individual species accounts and is followed a glossary, photo credits, the index etc. I found the introductory sections interesting and educational, well worth the read.

For the species section the author has collected the best photographs he could find. He has collected material from a large number of contributors, so the photo credits occupy 16 pages. Where no photos of live specimens exist he has used photos of museum specimens. All the photos of live, wild birds are really good quality. Presumably, if you find a bird that believes its camouflage is invincible it will sit for its portrait! These are accompanied by a small world map showing the locality and a large [quarter to half page] showing the bird’s distribution. The distribution maps are excellent and so much easier to use than those in most other guides.

The text notes habitat, calls, breeding, status and a description. It is in this last section that this book shows a weakness. These look-alike birds call for an extremely detailed description like those used in shorebird guides. The identification notes are very short. For example the author states that a Lesser Nighthawk has “White band toward the wing tip” and a Common Nighthawk has “White band mid-wing.” This is a critical field mark and this description is hardly as specific as it needs to be. Fortunately the flight photos of these birds clearly shows the slight, but discernable difference in this field mark. Most descriptions a similarly short.

In July this year the AOU split Whip-poor-will into the Eastern Whip-poor-will and the Mexican Whip-poor-will. The authors has anticipated this change and include them as separate species.

In addition to its value as an information source, I enjoyed re-visiting the photos. There are frogmouths with bad hair days and grumpy stares, potoos that look more like a branch than the real branch and quaint babies emerging as puffballs from a nearly invisible mother. All are quite delightful. This is a good, and fun, source book for avid naturalist. Now if I could only understand why the ancients called the birds goatsuckers in the weird belief that a pointed beaked bird would suck milk from tender parts of a goat.

ROY JOHN

2193 Emard Crescent, Ottawa, Ontario K1J 6K5 Canada

Raptors of New Mexico

Edited by Jean-Luc E. Cartron. University of New Mexico Press, 1312 Basehart Road, SE, Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA. 710 + xvi pages. 50.00 USD.

This six-pound, 726-page book – with 663 colour photographs – is both massive and sumptuous. As Richard L. Glinski says in his Foreword, it “sets a new

standard for state and regional raptor books. Without doubt, it is the best one out there. ... As an attractant, a visual aid, an educational display, a work of art, this