

Field Guide to the Birds of Australia – A photographic guide

By Iain Campbell, Sam Woods, and Nick Leseberg. 2014. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, NJ, USA, 08540-5237. 392 pages, 35.00 USD, Paper.

I often wonder why people write books. It is a huge amount of work with no real promise of reward. The author states he wanted to produce a simplified book for the novice and visitor. This is a laudable objective as too much information can be confusing. (This is why I recommend the original Peterson bird guides for beginners). The author has selected 714 species of resident birds and regularly occurring migrants out of the Australian list of 780. He uses more than 1,100 photographs as illustrations and provides facing-page text and range maps.

The book begins with a description of the various environmental zones. From a Canadian perspective this is most valuable. The Australian climate, geology and flora are so very different from our lush, green Canada. A portion of finding and identifying birds accurately involves recognising habitat. Canadian visitors to Australia are out of their context, so a good introduction to the eco-zones is a good start.

The species accounts are a little more expansive than Simpson and Day, but they give the same identification information. However, Campbell *et al.* give more on habitat and suggest the best locations to find the species (useful for a visitor). Also, I got a better sense of the chance of seeing a bird.

The photographs are high quality “studio” portraits of both males and females. Seabirds and raptors are often shown in flight. The problem is photographs do not always show the key features. This is exemplified by the photos of White-winged Chough (not a real chough or even a crow). While they are good portraits of this uniform black bird they do not show the large flash of white in the wings. Simpson and Day’s art work shows this feature clearly and they also insert a vignette chough on the look-alike currawong page. This is true for several species, such as the Red-backed Kingfisher (the red is just visible behind a branch). Similarly photos give little concept of relative size, something that is important for rails, raptors and ducks. It also means the unusual variations in plumage, such as the odd Fairy Tern that does sometimes have a black tip to its bill, is missed.

The authors say they exclude rare vagrants ... as they would confuse the vast majority of users. This makes perfect sense for novices and visitors. So I question the inclusion of Paradise Parrot (no records since the 1920s), the Orange-bellied Parrot (population 30 in remote south west Tasmania) and the secretive Night Parrot (a wildlife photographer spent 17,000 hours over 15 years to get the first ever photos). They also include other vagrants like some penguins, so they show some inconsistency in applying their rules.

Having read through this guide I developed a series of questions. Why create a new guide when Simpson and Day’s Field Guide to the Birds of Australia is now in its eighth edition in over 25 years with total sales exceeding over half a million copies? Especially as it is one of the most respected field guides in the birding community. Reviewers comments for Simpson and Day’s book include ... Birds of Australia is an unrivalled companion ... top-notch visual presentation, layout, and informational content ... and ... a wonderful piece of work. This classic guide is very tough, entrenched competition.

The section on habitats has maps of the geological and vegetation zones. I became confused when I saw the map for Mulga. It covered areas that were designated as other habitats such as Spinifex Grassland. So I went to Wikipedia and selected the Mulga Lands from the list of “Mulga” options. Wikipedia says Mulga Lands are in inland New South Wales and Queensland and their map disagrees with Campbell. It does appear that in Australia, Mulga is an alternative name for the wilderness.

Next I checked Spinifex and found it is a genus of grasses found on the coastal sand dunes of Australia and New Zealand. The inland grasses belong to the genus *Triodia* (commonly known as spinifex). A map in a scientific paper agrees with Campbell’s distribution.

So I moved on to Mallee, a type of eucalypt that has multiple stems on an underground tuber. The map in “Plants of the Mallee Shrublands” from the Australian National Botanic Gardens partially agrees with Campbell’s map, but the distribution of Malleefowl is in entire agreement.

I found these inconsistencies puzzling, but not distracting. When the author claims “that this guide almost always follows the International Ornithological Congress (actually the International Ornithologists’ Union, formerly International Ornithological Committee) taxonomy (IOC World Bird List 3) (Actually now at 4.4) I was surprised. I had already noted the odd position of the frogmouths and nightjars in the book; the ten to twelfth family in the book as they are 77th in IOC’s list of 241 extant families. Even more strange was the seventh position of Australasian Gannet and 19th for boobies. The Sulidae – Gannets, Boobies – are together and 32nd. I am all for putting birds of a feather together (the falcons with the hawk, the waterbirds – ducks, grebes, loons etc.) in a field guide, but this order makes no sense. The authors do split the Osprey into two species – the Eastern or Australian Osprey and the Western Osprey.

The guide covers only mainland Australia and Tasmania, but not the offshore territories. The one star bird on my Aussie list, Common Redpoll, is not included because I saw it on Macquarie Island. Technically Macquarie is part of Australia even though it is over 3,800 km away from the mainland.

So I am not sure how I would make out with this guide in the field. I intend to take it on my next trip to Australasia in 2015 and see how it compares to and supplements Simpson and Day's Field Guide to the Birds of Australia.

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