

## The Australian Bird Guide

By Peter Menkhorst, Danny Rogers, Rohan Clarke, Jeff Davies, Peter Marsack, and Kim Franklin. 2017. CSIRO Publishing. 576 pages, 49.95 AUS, Paper.

Technically, I had been to Australia in 2013. My single day on Macquarie Island in 2013, over 2000 km south of Melbourne, did not prepare me for the overwhelming barrage of new species and genera when I reached the mainland in 2017. What better to assist me to plough through this confusion than a brand-new field guide. And what a guide!

Australia, plus its offshore territories, has a list approaching 900 species, almost half of which are endemic. This new guide has around 4700 colour illustrations depicting over 900 species and covers all the distant islands. The authors include everything, from full coverage of vagrants to remote island territories and species known only as washed up bodies. Each species has illustrations of adults, juveniles, females, dark and light morphs, and summer and winter plumage as ap-

propriate. When necessary, birds are shown in flight. These depictions are not just accurate, they are beautiful. It is very useful to have the variation in plumages depicted, especially for a novice. So often the bird you see does not quite “fit” the book. Having multiple choices helps when you find a bird like a cuckoo-shrike. There are four similar species of cuckoo-shrike and having minor details helps narrow the choice. Also, the Australasian Figbird (*Specotheres vielloti*) has two subspecies (*S. v. vielloti* and *S. v. ashbyi*), both accurately depicted, and I saw both. My notes are such that if the taxonomists split these two into full species I will be able to count an armchair tick.

The illustrations are accompanied by text that is more informative and expansive than a typical guide. This comes at a price. The book is 18 × 25 × 3.3 cm

and weighs a whopping 1458 g. It is not a field guide. My copy of the 2004 *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia* by Simpson and Day is 80% lighter and fits my coat pocket. With the text are clear, readable range maps. These combine to provide better insight into the identification choices you can make.

I was with a non-birder companion when she said the call we had just heard was a wattlebird. I searched and had a very good look at a mid-size, streaky bird. I looked in the new guide for “wattlebird” and could not find an entry. I vaguely remembered that wattlebirds were close to miners, but there was no entry for miners either. By page flicking I found my bird: a Little Wattlebird (*Anthochaera chrysoptera*). I then realised the index does not group birds in the classical fashion (Wattlebirds —, Western Little, Red and Yellow). You need to know the full name—Little Wattlebird—before you can use the index. I found this both confusing and strange.

We continued our walk and saw a large flock of black-coloured cormorants with a single black and white bird in the group. This time, knowing there was a species called “Pied Cormorant”, I easily found the cormorant page. I had four choices. I eliminated one by range. Neighbouring birds gave me a good idea of length. Yet the authors do not include length, only weight. I cannot estimate weights in the field. (Remember a Great Horned Owl [*Bubo virginianus*] is 30% shorter than a Great Grey Owl [*Strix nebulosa*], but 30% heavier). In frustration I returned to my old copy of Simpson and Day. I identified my bird as a Little Pied Cormorant (*Microcarbo melanoleucos*).

I continued to use Simpson and Day out in the field. Each evening I would read up in Menkhorst *et al.*, as it provided more information. Sometimes, however, I wondered about the text. I spent a glorious day with a woman who was working hard on her Australia list. She had been to out-of-the-way (expensive) places like Macquarie and Heard Islands. Heard is the best place to find the resident Black-faced Sheathbill (*Chionis minor*), an endemic species. Yet Menkhorst *et al.* list it as a very rare vagrant with only one record. In contrast, they accept the tiny breeding colony of Common Redpoll (*Acanthis flammea*) on Macquarie as a resident species.

After I reached home I discovered there was a quick reference to bird families on page vi. This was very useful as I identified my photographs. I wish I had noticed it in the field. There was a visual quick reference on the inside cover. I could not use this effectively as I did know many of the bird shapes.

Overall, this is a wonderful book. The information and superb illustrations make it a tremendous contribution to the world’s bird books. Adding an index that would work well, editing some of the odd text, and re-labelling it a “handbook” would turn it into the true triumph it ought to be.

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#### Literature Cited

Simpson, K., and N. Day. 2004. *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia*, 7th Edition. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, USA.