

Handbook of the Birds of the World. Volume 13. Penduline-tits to Shrikes

Edited by Josep Del Hoyo, Andrew Elliott, and David A. Christie. 2008. Lynx Edicions, Montseny, 8, 08193 Bellaterra, Barcelona, Spain. 800 pages. 215 EUR, Cloth.

For the travelling birder, it can be very frustrating to realise that there is a species of bird that you may see on your next trip, but you do not have a current reference to clarify its status. For example, the Pink-browed Rosefinch – what exactly is its range? Will I be within that range? What are the characteristics that separate it from the Red-mantled Rosefinch? *Handbook of Birds of the World* has been that reference for all species it has covered to date. So it is doubly frustrating to know you are several volumes away from this precious resource. Not so the Penduline-tits to Shrikes, because they are covered in the latest volume, number 13. Can it be there are only three more volumes to the Icterids? The date set for Volume 16 is 2011, a mere two years and 28 families away. The rosefinches will be in Volume 15.

Volume 13 opens with an introductory essay on bird migration. I thought I had a good understanding of this topic. I did not. This essay might be better titled Bird Movements, because the subject is much more complex than I realised. This well-written piece takes much that I knew and much that I did not know and puts it into an organized framework. I now have a far more complete understanding of this subject. The article also points out our lack of knowledge in many areas. Doctoral students can relax; there is a host of research projects that need attention.

The main body of this volume covers 16 families covering 595 species, as follows: Penduline-tits, Long-tailed Tits, Nuthatches, Wallcreeper, Treecreepers, Rabbornis, Sunbirds, Berrypeckers and Longbills, Painted Berrypeckers, Flowerpeckers, Pardalotes, White-eyes, Sugarbirds, Honeyeaters, Orioles and Shrikes.

Three of these families form 50% of the book; the Sunbirds, Honey-eaters and White-eyes. Of the remaining 13 families over half have fewer than 10 species. Most of the species live in Asia and Australasia.

The White-eyes are 98 species of chickadee-sized greenish to yellowish birds, most with white eye rings. This family gives me a lot of heartache. The various species are spread from Africa to Oceania, and many live on only one or, possibly two, islands. A great many of them are very similar, varying only in minute detail. For tick-listers the problems are reduced by there being only one species on each island. Within the family is the Silvereye, a greenish imp with a grey back and a broken eye ring. So the Silvereye is not a horrifying challenge to separate from the other white-eyes. My confusion comes with the 16 sub-species, some of which are confined to single islands. Why are they not separate species like the white-eyes? There is as much of a difference between these sub-species as there is between recognized species of white-eye.

Another bird that has frustrated me is the Wallcreeper, a lone species in its own family. I have looked and listened for this dove grey and carmine bird several times without success. I will have to be satisfied with the dozen lovely photographs and the equally fine artwork for now.

The honey-eaters are found in Australasia and Oceania, with several again being confined to single islands. While a few are colourful, most are Downy to Hairy woodpecker-sized, greenish or brownish birds. By contrast, the sunbirds are stunning gems. Iridescent red, blue, green and yellow are usual colours, especially among males. The beautiful yellow, shining green and blue Nile Valley Sunbird is typical and is the only species I got as a lifer while riding a donkey!

Of the smaller families the treecreepers are the most curious. This is where *Handbook of Birds of the World* comes into its own. On one page you can see illustrations of all ten treecreepers. Six of the ten are very similar and three others are quite similar. The range maps show that six are Asian and only one occurs in North America. Some have huge ranges and several have restricted ranges. One has to wonder why? Is there really only one species in all of North America?

Once again, the *Handbook of Birds of the World* authors have made appropriate decisions on which recent splits to accept. For example, the Chinese Silver-throated Tit is split from widespread Long-tailed Tit. The *Remiz* complex has been split into Eurasian, Black-headed, White-crowned and Chinese Penduline-tits. Similarly the *Sitta* complex has been split into Eurasian, Chestnut-vented, Kashmir and Przewalski's nuthatches. The Indian Golden Oriole has been split from the Eurasian. [A bird I missed last year, but hope to see this year]. These and several other splits are in keeping with the current literature.

The birding world has come to expect a consistent, high calibre from Lynx and they will not be disappointed. The *Handbook of Birds of the World* team have added another great volume with great photos, illustrations and text. It will let you compare like species such as Southern and Great Grey shrikes, [remember, though, it is a handbook not a field guide, so will not help you separate, say, the extreme plumages of Bay-backed and Long-tailed shrikes] and help you resolve distributions on a global scale. It will be particularly valuable to those who live in Asia or Australasia or who plan to travel there. Some North Americans may be disappointed to find there are only nine North American species in the 595, but only if they are not interested in the whole world of birds.

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