

In conclusion, *Snakes of the United States and Canada* is an impressive compilation of natural history and captive care data for our native North American species. For those readers interested in supplementing their collection of field guides or species care handbooks, this book is a worthwhile acquisition.

Furthermore, anyone considering snake ownership would be well advised to at least borrow a copy.

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Stonechats: A Guide to the Genus *Saxicola*

By E. Urquhart and A. Bowley. 2002. Yale University Press, New Haven and London. 320 pages. U.S. \$60. Cloth.

This book is delightful and does the *Saxicola* genus a great service. It covers 14 members of this genus from the Old World, which is as fascinating as it can get for birders since it deals with countries like India, Nepal, Russia, Indonesia and with various other fascinating locations in Europe and Africa.

Obviously, this book is a great reflection of the so entrenched English and European birding culture, and the author links also well to Russian, German and Scandinavian *Saxicola* studies. The explicit goal of this book is to provide as much information on the Stonechat species as possible. The authors achieved in their book a huge compilation of a tremendous amount of information and references relevant to Stonechats such as Nest Record Cards from the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), BTO Migration Atlas, World Bird Database by BirdLife International, 10 museum collections and many others; for instance, over 173 individual investigators are mentioned in the acknowledgment section of this publication. This makes for a text crowded with details.

The very detailed accounts for the 14 species and their subspecies deal with taxonomy, identification, description, distribution, breeding, habitat, voice, food, movements, behaviour, moult, conservation and literature references.

From a biologist's perspective, some of the present distribution maps might have too many straight lines, but they show great detail in regards to extralimital sightings, wintering, summer and subspecies distributional ranges (but not search effort and migration flyways). The limitations of these maps are also well addressed and explained. For people with an interest in avian biogeography, this book presents a large goldmine consisting of fascinating endemism and distribution data, e.g. for White-tailed Stonechat and Pied Bushchat. The text and presented data offer great opportunities for further spatial interpretation and predictive modeling. A comprehensive World Distribution Map for the genus *Saxicola* is unfortunately missing.

Tables showing wing, tail and bill measurements are also presented but some do not provide sample sizes. The voice sections and sonograms are nice summaries on what is known on the vocalization for each species. Often, the presented vocalization data cast serious doubt on the traditional concept of point count surveys and habitat mapping for these species since they

can sing during migration even, and also mimic other species brilliantly; often also both genders can sing! The authors' concept that only birders would decide which exact bird names are used eventually for bird species world-wide might still be open for discussion. Anyway, it's great to read the section provided on explanations of English and scientific names.

Remarkable are the extremely powerful and very well done colour plates and the many smaller fascinating black-and-white sketches displaying specific behaviours. They are based on great field observations by A. Bowley and E. Urquhart. Over 100 photographs are provided as well allowing for excellent visual aids in species identification.

For my taste, some of the interpretations of the reported research findings are too nationalistic, e.g. stating that birds in Germany, in the former USSR, in Greece, in UK etc. would do specific things. Besides presenting a generalization, such an interpretation does not consider that the area size differs so much among countries. Instead, it might be better to state findings from a sample of a population or from studied individuals.

The authors say that "...many younger birders now only concentrate on identifying and seeing as many different species as possible, without taking time to study the all-round ecology of the species they see". The book includes a short but informative *Saxicola* DNA chapter by Wink et al. dealing with long lists of TCAs, RAAs, CGAs etc. which I cannot fully comprehend; hopefully the birder in the field can. The authors suggest to split the Common Stonechat complex into three species. Generally, one finds birders and geneticists closely linked nowadays, but for me they represent odd bed-fellows. Geneticists dictate a lot of what happens in the birding field nowadays. However, so far avian geneticists have not always clarified situations but rather made amateur birders more dizzy in what constitutes a species, a subspecies and who is evolutionarily related to whom.

This book includes 11 pages of international Stonechat literature references. This provides for a text which offers much fascinating reading such as for instance for the Stolizka's Bushchat and for the highly endangered Hodgson's Bushchat. Interestingly enough, albinism occurs in the genus *Saxicola* whereas leucism appears to be non-existent in the literature and is probably very rare. Presented conservation topics in this book deal for instance with the stability or decline of national *Saxicola* populations, but caution is to be

used since many population estimation methods differ greatly by country and in the time-windows for which these data are presented. As for many birders from central and northern Europe, the authors elaborate on the believed to be very detrimental effects of (song) bird hunting in the southern EU (but they show less attention for these issues in Africa). A consistent theme is that landscape changes affect all stonechat species; their relations with forthcoming climate change are not elaborated on.

True preferences for nest, food and habitat, taking their availability fully into account, are still not reported and are usually not known for most of the discussed species. This presents often a shortcoming in traditional birding books (the difference between resource use and resource preference has been known for over 30 years and should really be addressed in modern book texts).

As this and other advanced birding books show, the birding, taxonomy and publishing world has just not found a convenient way to describe and summarize relevant species plumage identification features; e.g.,

Birds of Yorkton – Duck Mountain

By C. S. Houston and W. Anaka. 2003. Saskatchewan Natural History Society, 206-1860 Lorne Street, Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 2L7 Canada. ii + 318 pages. Paper \$20 plus \$4 shipping.

In Saskatoon there is a powerhouse of a human called Stuart Houston. As a professor of medicine he has influenced many young lives, not the least his own children. From a tender age he had a passion for birds, and I do not mean as a birder but as a scientist. This passion has resulted in a lifetime of bird banding, research and many publications. This alone would make his achievements remarkable. He has another achievement to his credit. He has encouraged, led or cajoled an army of people to join in his passion. There are a large number of people who now band, write, research, observe and record, myself included, as we never did before. For *Birds of Yorkton-Duck Mountain* he is joined by a Yorkton local, Bill Anaka.

Birds of Yorkton-Duck Mountain is a very thoroughly researched collection of all the available data on the birds in this corner of Saskatchewan. Anaka and Houston have combed all conceivable pockets of information from Audubon notes to unpublished data. The species account gives a very clear picture of the status of all birds recorded from Quill Lake to the Manitoba border near Shellmouth. These accounts cover common nesters to bizarre and clearly incorrect reports. They are well presented and provide a valuable resource for all those interested in birds of the region, particularly for those doing research. The Duck Mountain area is given special note, as it is sufficiently different from the rest of the area. For example, the Evening Grosbeak is variable in the parkland, but is resident at Duck Mountain.

in a table or in any other format easy to comprehend for the user. Instead, the descriptive plumage text still deals with all the “usually”, “often”, “manys” and other sometimes vague terminology trying to put (individual) feathers and colours into words; over decades, this has developed into a slang of its own, presenting almost an anthropological literature phenomenon. Here two such examples from the text: “The lower mandible is pale horn-brown on the basal third”, and “Underparts are also duller than in the adult female and the breast and foreflanks can show narrow brown fringes to the feathers giving a slight mottled appearance”.

Anyway, this publication makes for the stonechat bible, presented by the authors as a true labour of love and obsession; they are to be congratulated. This publication is worth reading, and should stand in your bookshelf for specifics on species information and identification.

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The book contains several maps. The first is an excellent fold-out map of the area covered. It does not show roads (so it is uncluttered), but does depict towns, etc. There are several banding recovery maps. These are not labeled, but it is an obvious guess as to what they represent. They are identified obliquely in the acknowledgments as waterfowl migratory pathways by Kathy Meeres and locations where young were banded by Kelvin Wylie.

After reading this book I commented to a friend that the data given show the disappearance of the Passenger Pigeon was followed by the subsequent expansion of the Mourning Dove into this area. It was an interesting correlation. However, I had some difficulty in finding the pages to show him because there is no index. You must know the sequence of the current AOU 49th supplement to be able to find a species account.

The book has several useful appendices. The first gives a list of all the species seen in the area. This is followed by a summary of the Breeding Bird Surveys, then a list of banded species. Finally there is a list of waterfowl banders and their banding records.

I think these regional accounts are very important contributions to the record of knowledge. While this book may have limited sales in the local area and among a group of specialists, I believe it will be an important document for many years to come. In comparison to other similar works this is a scholarly and very professional product. The authors and the Saskatchewan Natural History Society are to be commended for undertaking this project.

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