

BOOK REVIEW

Pittas of the World: A Monograph of the Pitta Family.

Johannes Erritzoe, with paintings by Helga Boulet Erritzoe. The Lutterworth Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom. 207 pp., 32 colour-plates, 12 figures (line drawings and black-and-white photographs), 12 tables, 5 appendices, Bibliography. RRP £30.

This is a great book! It is packed with information, being about the current state of our knowledge of this wonderful group of birds, the Pittas, with a strong conservation bias. The emphasis on current status is no surprise, since the jacket describes a recent book about CITES birds by the same author. 'Pittas of the World' is an apparently exhaustive and up-to-date collation of fact, assessment and observation in the field and in the aviary.

'Pittas of the World' comprises: an introduction; detailed accounts for each of the 31 species recognized; and a number of appendices. Within each species there are: summaries of names (main European names vernacular and scientific); standard description by sex and age, including information and photographs of live birds; allied species; distribution; recent records after 1975; movements; habitat; behaviour; vocalization; food and feeding behaviour; breeding biology including egg dimensions and description; moult; captivity; general notes (dominated by etymology of scientific names); parasites and disease; museum diagnosis (really a summary of the treatments by Peters, Sibley and Munroe, Wolters and sometimes one or two others); hybridization; status and conservation; short references (given in full in the main Bibliography) and colour plates (including details of the specimens used). The recognized subspecies are listed and treated in more detail, with the standard dimensions tabulated.

Adequate range maps are provided; these are carefully plotted for the species of limited range or for individual specimens. For such wide-ranging species as *P. cucullata*, the range of New Delhi to Port Moresby is 71.4 mm by dial calipers; this is a ratio of one hundred million to one.

Egg data are fascinating but unfortunately, problematical (Cahill's recent article on the rigid requirements of the much-maligned North suggest why; see 'Aust. Birds' 31). For example, the few available data for the egg size of the Giant Pitta show a range of variation thought improbable by some. Erritzoe prefers the Berlin data, even though these measurements are hardly different from those of much smaller species, whereas the 'presume[d]' 'erroneous' measurements fit in well with the bird's size, and the weight of the hatchling. The fact that enough data are given for a reviewer to calculate and comment is what makes the book so valuable.

Derivation of names is often interesting, if only because they are often somewhat inappropriate. This is true of *Pitta guajana*, which of course did *not* come from Guiana, any more than *Pygoscelis papou* was first collected in Papua (or New Guinea). In most cases Erritzoe quotes (under General Notes) the excellent 'Dictionary of Bird Names' by Jobling, but finds it more probable that *granatina* comes straightforwardly from the Latin word meaning 'garnet-like', than from a Latinization of a French word for 'grenadier' as Jobling suggests. I do not know if Temminck actually gave the intended meaning, but most of his many names for birds (as well as fish and others) are good if not always classical Latin. The modern French name is *brève grenadine*, which I think is only distantly related to grenade-tossers, presumably intended (like the English borrowing) as 'coloured by the dye magenta or fuchsin', originally from the pomegranate, i.e. the *poma granatum*, or apple with grains (or seeds), that garnet-coloured fruit shaped like (and giving the name of) a grenade. A nice etymological web! I found the derivation of *flynnstonei* evocative, and would be interested to know who Ben King's (1976) *deborah* was.

Apparently Gould 1871 AMNH ser. 4, 7:240 originally described the Necklaced Pitta as *Pitta [Phoenicocichla] arcuata*, but it is usually spelt *arcuata*.

Erritzoe speculates on the 'origin of Pittas', but he makes the common but unreliable assumption that modern taxon-richness is the key to the distant past so that 'the great number of endemic subspecies in the Oriental region suggests that pittas originated' there 'radiating into the adjacent regions to the west in India and Africa, and to the east in Australia and the Philippines. An example illustrates this. The Malay Peninsula and Sumatra are inhabited by the same subspecies of Giant', Banded and Garnet Pitta, while 'the Bornean birds belong to different subspecies.' The example tells us nothing at all about the origin of pittas. It does suggest some things about the recent past history of south-east Asia. It implies that the rainforests of Malaya and Sumatra have been more or less continuous until very recently while that of

Borneo has been at least genetically isolated for longer. Modern taxon-richness allows us to make guesses about the complex interactions between radiation/speciation opportunities, habitat continuity in time and space, isolation mechanisms and dispersal abilities, and about past population sizes. However, it probably does not tell us anywhere near as much as many theorists like to make out. Pittas almost certainly split off from other extant songbird families some tens of millions of years ago; an entirely different time-scale. Judging by modern taxon-diversity, for example the horse family, which is of similar antiquity 'must have originated' either in Africa or Asia; palaeontology tells it that in fact the first 90 per cent of horse history took place in North America even though there are no native taxa there today. There are no Pitta fossils anywhere and they might have 'originated' right there: anywhere. The oldest-known fossil songbird is the fascinating fragment, described by Walter Bowles, from Murgon in south-eastern Queensland. It is about the right size for a Pitta, but probably was not one.

A book with so much text could not be entirely free of typographical and other errors, and this one had many. Offhand I presume that 'a bird collected by Pratt Bross' (page 90) was really taken by the Pratt Brothers, who got many specimens in the Indo-Australian area. 'Tree Mile Plot' (page 104), where Harry Bell made observations on Hooded Pittas in 1976-77 is really 'Three Mile' (by odometer from Brown River Bridge) where I banded birds in 1969-75, including Hooded and Red-bellied Pittas. A European who admits being grateful for help with the difficult English Language may be excused a few such lapses, but the French *brève pomtrine verte* (page 96), should read *poitrine* (cognate of Golden Whistler's *pectoralis*).

Geographical names present special problems for all writers, since spellings change with time and politics and vary between and even within one language, but some Pitta data here suffers from neglect as well. Banyak (Island) is listed twice in Appendix 2 (an interesting listing of pitta status on all the islands they are reported to occupy) and as Banjak as well, a variant spelling I believe: each listing the single species *moluccensis*. Great Karimun is listed on page 177 and its neighbour is spelled Little Karimoon on page 178: consistency would be nice. Sula is properly an island group, of which Taliabu is one, geologically part of the Sulawesi (Celebes) complex but adjacent to the Moluccas (Maluku), so of great neobiological interest. According to Appendix 2, Sula has *P. erythrogaster dohertyi* 'uncommon' (page 179), while Taliabu has the same subspecies 'common', as well as another taxon *elegans elegans* 'near-threatened' (page 180); I know that 'Sula' is used loosely for Sula Magoke (the type locality of *dohertyi*), but does everybody? The appendix is not a bad step, but there is much more information available which could have been included; for example for Honshu and Oki *nympha* is listed as rare and recorded (alright as far as it goes) whereas the Checklist of Japanese Birds (1974) gives 'casual but frequent visitor May to August' for both.

Himalaya is often listed throughout the text as though it were a nation independent of India, where Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim are not. Countries are generally listed alphabetically, obviously for ease of reference; but I found it confusing to read through. Even the synopses are not always entirely in geographical sequence; e.g. Hooded Pitta ranges from India to (South) China, and Nicobars to Bismarcks, then jumps back to the Sulu Arch. and Philippines (which is the type locality).

Bird body mass varies seasonally (and a lot, even in a day); so weights are applaudably listed by month where known, but no account is taken of the fact that seasons are reversed approximately (but not exactly) at the equator. The Hooded Pitta, the Angola Pitta, and others, breed on both sides of the line, and it would have been useful had the data for these taxa been noted accordingly.

The illustrations do not leap immediately to the eye. Pittas are big, bold birds, larger than life, thrilling organisms; stunning. They glow. Their portraits here do not give that impression at first, but I found they grew on me. The more I look at them, the more I appreciate them. The exquisite detail is not just feather-by-feather but barbule-by-barbule, and may subdue the overall effect. Perhaps there is just too much background, even allowing that Pittas live in very complex environments.

But these are miniscule blemishes. This is a first-rate book which bird-lovers and book-lovers will enjoy and I think find useful. The price is within the range of all leaving only 176 other family monographs to buy!

L. W. Filewood
School of Biological Sciences, University of New South Wales