REVIEWS

A Field Guide to Australian Birds: Passerines, by Peter Slater. Rigby, Adelaide, 1974. xv + 309 pp. Price $7.95.

This is the second and final part of Slater's field guide, eagerly awaited since the non-passerine section was published about five years ago (reviewed in *Aust. Bird Bander*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1971). Compared with 428 pp. for the first part, the 309 pp. size for the passerines is somewhat surprising, as generally the two main divisions in Australian birds are considered about equal. However, the author has 'lumped' more noticeably in this second book; 22 species of the 1926 *Checklist* being reduced in the non-passerines against 46 dropping to sub-specific rank in the passerine volume.

It is over 40 years since Neville Cayley's *What Bird is That?* was first published, marking an important event in Australian ornithology. It was the first time a popular book appeared in which all Australian birds were illustrated in colour. Now with the second part of Slater's *Field Guide* another publication, with coloured illustrations of all our birds and within the monetary reach of most field-workers, becomes available. One noticeable difference needs emphasis—Cayley had a newly-compiled *Checklist* (1926) for a guide, which he followed meticulously (there were few additions, e.g. Gascoyne Cuckoo-Shrike and Cave Owl), while Slater has been forced to use his own personal views, based no doubt on common usage, published material and suggestions by others.

It may be of interest to indicate differences in specific recognition between the two publications, divided by a forty-year time gap. In the two volumes of the recent *Field Guide* 761 species have been given a binomial name and a separate paragraph in the text. Amongst that number are 17, all non-passerines, not yet recorded in Australia proper, although all reach either Antarctica, Macquarie Island, Lord Howe Island or islands adjacent to the north. There were 19 others included in the 1926 *Checklist* which, being recorded less than three times, were not numbered and not considered by Cayley. There are 24 introduced and established birds and 62 that have been either recorded in Australia since 1926, are new species or are races raised to specific status. As stated earlier, 68 of the 1926 *Checklist* species were dropped to subspecific rank by Slater, making the 707 numbered species of the 1926 *Checklist*, which were all illustrated and treated specifically in Cayley's 1931 edition. Of that number 639 were retained as distinct by Slater.

As was noticeable in the first volume of the *Field Guide*, there are some rather disconcerting attempts to give birds trinomial scientific names. A field book is not the place for 'upgrading' subspecies. If the author believes a certain bird is not sufficiently distinct for specific status, that is his prerogative. It should, however, be either omitted or if it is illustrated (as was done many times by Slater), not given a separate paragraph and heading as is given species, and clearly stated in the text to be a geographical race. This has been done correctly by the author for the Allied Tree Creeper *Climacteris wellsi*, which is clearly indicated as a race of *C. melanura*. This should have been done similarly for *C. melanota* instead of giving it a bold heading in the text and a trinomial name, *Climacteris picumnus melanota*. It could be argued that *Entomyzon cyanotis albipennis* and scores of similar examples are races just as distinct, but omitted from any mention.

If a modern *Checklist* had been available, no doubt the author would have followed it carefully and not have been forced to give a third name on 14 occasions. A typical instance of problems that can arise with probable indecision on a species is exemplified by the Little Tree Creeper. There is no mention of it whatever in the book and no doubt some people will be puzzled as to its fate. Presumably it has been considered a race of the White-throated Tree Creeper, as has been suggested, but the range of *C. minor* is not added to that of *C. leucophaea* in either text or map and the indications are that it was completely overlooked.

The first 84 pages of Slater's passerine book are a real contribution to Australian ornithology. In general the plates are clearly reproduced, carefully depicted and admirably suited for a field guide. Plate 25 shows the Mistletoebird in a different stance, indicating its distinctiveness in the flowerpecker family, while the related pardalotes are shown in typical pose with diagnostic plumage differences and sexual characteristics indicated. The notes opposite each plate stress the main identification features. However, the latter section of the book is not so impressive, the data for each species, apart from ample plumage descriptions and notes on voice, being relatively uninformative. Some extra mention on behaviour, unusual habits, ecological preferences, flight, economic values, food, egg colouration and more detailed nesting information would have been most helpful.

The maps are not sufficiently accurate. This method of conveying distribution data is highly commendable but care must be exercised to be of full value. Often they do not agree with the distribution notes. The range of the Bar-breasted Honeyeater is stated as 'Northern Australia from Derby, Western Australia to Mackay, Queensland', but the map shows it comes east no further than the central-western part of Cape York Peninsula; the Rufous-banded Honeyeater is said to occur in 'Northern Australia, as far east as Townsville', yet the map shows only the far north-centre of the Northern Territory and the west coast of Cape

York Peninsula; the Yellow-plumed Honeyeater's written range is 'Eastern Australia', but the map shows all south-western Australia to south-western New South Wales; for the Southern Emu-Wren, Tasmania is correctly included in the text but omitted on the map. Distribution in New South Wales differs somewhat from that given in *A Hand List of the Birds of New South Wales* (1960) for some birds such as the Skylark, Greenfinch, Plum-headed Finch, Black-throated Finch, Diamond Firetail and White-winged Chough. An official or unofficial list of birds is readily available for each Australian state and, although some might be in need of revision, the information given in each makes compilation of range maps easier and more reliable than would have been possible 20 years ago. Therefore is is perplexing to read in the 'Acknowledgements' that 11 ornithologists 'studied the maps and suggested amendments in the light of their knowledge'. With space an important factor in a field guide covering so many species the written distribution could have been omitted, or habitat combined with it under one sub-heading.

Some innovations are noticeable in the higher taxonomy of family designation and systematic sequence. The Magpie-Lark is given a separate family, Grallinidae, whilst its two supposed mudnest-building relatives, the Apostlebird and White-winged Chough, have been transferred to the babblers, Timaliidae. The warbler assemblage is broken up into four families—Ephthianuridae for the five chats (which are placed between the whistlers, Pachycephalidae and the sittellas, Sittidae); Australian wrens (Maluridae, which contains the bristlebirds); Old World warblers (Sylviidae); Australian warblers (Acanthizidae), the last three in that running sequence. It is odd to find the Plum-headed Finch separating the Gouldian Finch from its nearest relatives in *Erythrura*, which keeps the 'plum-head' from its closest relatives in *Lonchura*.

Use of the possessive case is made in some vernaculars, but there is inconsistency. This differs from that adopted by J. D. Macdonald in his *Birds of Australia* (1973), as well as the arrangement in the 1926 *Checklist*. Slater makes use of Gilbert's Whistler, Macleay's Honeyeater, Hall's Babbler, etc. but retains Albert Lyrebird, Victoria Riflebird and Lewin Honeyeater. Those who advocate the possessive in English vernaculars would use Lesser Lewin's Honeyeater, which in plain English means 'the honeyeater belonging to the lesser Mr Lewin'. Some serious attempt should be made to eliminate such vernaculars and in so doing avoid the controversy between the two schools of thought in this matter. Surely *Pomatostomus halli* sufficiently recognizes merit rightly bestowed and White-throated or Black-bellied Babbler (both have been suggested) be used instead of simply anglicising the scientific name.

Despite some light criticism herein given, Peter Slater's volumes will grace my library with dignity and I know they will be consulted many times, with both the text and plates giving pleasure during my quieter moments.

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Australian Bush Birds in Colour, by Irene and Michael Morcombe, A. H. & A. W. Reed Pty Ltd, Sydney. 108 pp. including 46 colour plates, black and white illustrations. Price $4.95.

This is yet another book in a series published by A. H. & A. W. Reed, covering aspects of Australian and New Zealand natural history and cultural life. It is a 'sister' volume to one of the first of the series entitled *Australian Birds in Colour* by Keith Hindwood, 1966 (reviewed in *Aust. Bird Bander* vol. 5, no. 1, p. 23, March 1967).

Hindwood's book depicted 52 species including those on the front and back covers which were also reproduced on the dust jacket. Eleven photographers contributed to that volume. In the present book the authors provided all the photographs covering a further 48 species, one of which (the Crimson Chat) is also used on the dust jacket. Most of the photographs are excellent. However, some such as the Little Eagle and Tawny-crowned Honeyeater would have been better depicted had there been a little more of the surrounding included. Also, it is a pity that the two Yellow Robins (Western and Eastern) were photographed in different circumstances, so conveying to newcomers birds of completely different plumage colouration.

It is interesting to note the shape of the cheek-patch on the White-cheeked Honeyeater which is the Western race of the species; the text includes mention that the bill of the Western race is longer than that of the Eastern form, and this is evident in the photograph. But I have not seen birds of the Eastern population with a cheek-patch as is shown in the photograph and in the accompanying drawing.

The text gives a brief resume of the habits, habitat and distribution of each species while black and white drawings are included in many cases; these depict closely-related species (e.g. Masked with Black-faced Wood-Swallow, Eastern with Western Spinebill), nest, etc.

There is a list of the 'Contents' and an 'Introduction' which outlines the selection as '. . . probably more representative of this continent than a choice from some other group'; brief details are given of the families represented. It is hoped that many people will read the short comment on the impact of white man on our bird life. Finally there is a page giving 'Notes on Photographic Technique', a list of 'Further Reading' and an 'Index'.

In all, this is a well-produced book of general interest and a worthy mate of the earlier volume. It is hoped that this second book of the series on Australian birds will not be the last but that others will follow covering such groups as water birds, birds of the inland and ground-dwellers.

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