

REVIEWS

Birds of New Guinea. Illustrations from John Gould; text by A. Rutgers, Methuen & Co. Ltd London EC4, 1970. pp 1-321 with 160 colour-plates from the lithographs of John Gould. Price \$10.70.

This volume is the fourth of a series issued by Methuen making a selection of the magnificent colour plates of Gould available to the general public at reasonable cost. To the previous volumes *Birds of Europe* (1966), *Birds of Australia* (1967), *Birds of Asia* (1969) will be added a fifth, *Birds of South America* thus completing the series. Layout of each has been similar, with back-to-back full page plates matched with up to a page of accompanying text. Overall the design is clean, pleasant to handle and the colour plates superbly reproduced with no poor registration of the various overlays.

The selection of plates is rather puzzling. Although titled "Birds of New Guinea", analysis reveals that three species are endemic to Australia—the Chestnut-breasted Whiteface, Spotted Bower-bird and Pied Sittella—hardly a choice relevant to this tropical island! Sixteen species are shared between Australia and New Guinea, some such as the Eclectus Parrot and Trumpet Bird undoubtedly of New Guinea origin, and others such as the Little Corella and Mistletoe-bird invaders from Australia. The use of subspecific names in most cases, however, substantiates the New Guinea distribution.

The bulk of the plates fall into the two categories of New Guinea and surrounding islands (92 plates) and New Guinea islands only (38 plates).

As such, then, the work is valuable in illustrating many of the species for this area which are not included in the planned systematic plates of Rand & Gilliard or in the less pleasing illustrations in Iredale. Particularly useful are the 38 plates of New Guinea islands birds which are not available elsewhere. The inclusion of four plates of hybrid species is of doubtful value, and the repetition of some species by illustrations of more than one subspecies could both have been better replaced by more critical selection of relevant birds.

Although it may be unfair to criticise Gould's illustrations, which were superbly executed through difficulties of distance and time, their very accuracy is a factor contributing to their criticism. The Yellow-eared (Tawny-breasted) Honeyeater, *Meliphaga* (*Xanthotis*) *flaviventer flaviventer*, for instance is a bird of northern Australia and New Guinea yet is depicted on a twig of Bushy Yate *Eucalyptus megacornuta* found in a limited area in south-west Australia. The Black-headed Pitta, *Pitta sordida*, lives permanently beneath heavy rainforest canopy, not in the open desert-like habitat shown in the plate; the King Bird of Paradise, *Cicinnurus regius* has brilliant cobalt-blue legs, a most conspicuous feature in life; etc. etc. Accepting the fact then, that there are errors such as this the plates are worthwhile studies of each individual species.

The text similarly contains many inaccuracies and omissions and indicates that it is a work of reference

in most cases, rather than a relating of experience. The nomenclature used and distributions of the subspecies rely heavily upon Rand and Gilliard yet contain some omissions. The subspecies *Machaerirhynchus flaviventer novus* is not mentioned although the other three subspecies are. In the Fairy Lory *Charmosyna papou* marked colour variation occurs from the normal red adult form through to a striking melanistic form; no mention is made of this. Small criticism, perhaps, but one gets the impression that the text in places attempts to be an accurate up-to-date dissertation, yet anomalies can be found which cast doubt upon the whole.

In summary, then: recognising that the plates suffer inaccuracies of historical circumstances, and the text inaccuracies of omission and lack of field experience, the book is still a worthwhile buy as a regional guide and better than many of the natural history publications currently flooding the Australian market.

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Extracts from Letters

The following letter dated 15 October 1970 was received from Dr H. Elliott McClure, Bangkok, Thailand.

"The Turnstones go north thru Japan in the spring and swing over into the Pribilof and east Siberian area. There they nest and then go south into the South Pacific later to move west and north again to complete the circuit. None of the Japanese banded birds have returned to Japan in the fall.

"We also have an unidentified recovery from the New Guinea area. We loaned a German some rings and nets to do some work there a few years ago, but he has refused to send us his records. We have a recovery of one of the birds bearing a number which we gave him, but no knowledge what the bird is. Some people want co-operation in one direction only.

"We too are interested in the possible exchange of kingfishers between Indonesia and Australia or New Guinea. So far all of the recoveries that we have received from Indonesia banded birds have been from egrets and cormorants and these have been from Java or Sumatra.

"I enjoy looking at the longevity records of birds in your *Australian Bird Bander*. We are working on survival now and have sunbirds and fantail flycatchers up to eight years old already. Even after we close down, these old age records are going to continue to come in."