

A COMMENT ON SOME ERRORS IN THE LITERATURE REGARDING AUSTRALIAN OWLS

A review of the Duncan (2003) book *Owls of the World* (Debus 2004), and subsequent responses to it, highlight some errors in the literature on Australasian owls, including several in the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* (HBW; del Hoyo *et al.* 1999) that were overlooked in a review of that book by Debus (2001). These errors particularly concern the ecology of the Southern Boobook *Ninox novaeseelandiae* and the taxonomic status of its regional forms.

HBW gave the home-range size of the Southern Boobook as 8 hectares, with 37 hectares the upper limit. However, Olsen and Trost (1997) claimed at least 50 to 100 hectares, later confirmed by Olsen and Taylor (2001) as 122 hectares. HBW was also incorrect on eye colour ('yellow, possibly brown') of the Sumba Boobook *Ninox rudolphi*, whereas König *et al.* (1999) ('brown') was not; König *et al.* correctly described the song of this owl as a 'series of . . . short . . . cough-like notes', but HBW thought it to be a threat call (see Olsen, Wink, Sauer-Gürth and Trost 2002).

The most significant error concerns the split, by both HBW and König *et al.*, of the Southern Boobook into two species, the Australian mainland *N. boobook* versus the Morepork *N. novaeseelandiae* of New Zealand, Norfolk Island (subspecies *undulata*) and Tasmania (subspecies *leucopsis*). This split was based on a misinterpretation of DNA evidence presented by Norman *et al.* (1988a,b), pointed out in an American review (Roberson 2000):

. . . the authors [of HBW] misconstrued published papers on biochemical evidence which do not support the split of the Boobook of Australia from the Morepork of New Zealand; indeed, the papers cited came to the opposite conclusion! In any case, it is inappropriate for a reference work like this to present these splits as *faits accomplis* without any real peer review.

The Norman *et al.* papers have generated some confusion (e.g. Debus 2002) over where the evidence was for the split, given that their DNA evidence indicated that *undulata*, nominate *novaeseelandiae* and *leucopsis* from Tasmania belonged to one species but did not address the Southern Boobook from mainland Australia. The following direct quote from L. Christidis was posted to the Birding-Aus chatline on 26 October 1999 by M. Mules, in response to an earlier question about the grouping of the Tasmanian Boobook with the New Zealand Boobook in HBW. The Christidis comment was quoted by Penhallurick (2002, footnote xii) in the fine print in a specialized book, so it deserves a more prominent airing:

In these papers the Tasmanian Boobook Owl samples were included to represent the Australian Boobook. There was never any suggestion that the mainland and Tasmanian Boobook were different species. We are in the process of writing up our data on variation in the

Australian forms of boobook, mainland and Tasmanian, and there is no suggestion that they are different species. So far as the molecular data [are] concerned, Australia (including Tasmania), Norfolk Island and New Zealand share the one species of Boobook Owl, *Ninox novaeseelandiae*.

HANZAB (Higgins 1999) rightly combined the boobooks, and Newton *et al.* (2002) followed suit for Australian species. The issue is critical because boobooks are the only Australian raptor (subspecies) we have lost, so it is doubly important to be clear about taxonomic relationships within boobooks.

On the basis of colour-marked and radio-tracked Boobooks, Olsen and Trost (1997), Olsen and Taylor (2001) and Olsen *et al.* (2002a,b) challenged several long-held assumptions about Australian owls, in particular the belief that Boobook pairs duet (in the strict sense of the word). Although these new data and interpretations were reluctantly accepted in Australia (e.g. Higgins 1999), no owl biologist has responded with any data to the contrary.

In Australia we seldom see the sorts of debates and rejoinders about papers, such as appear in North American and European journals. One could reasonably ask whether such a situation is good for Australian science.

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BOOK REVIEW

Field Guide to Australian Birds: Complete Compact Edition

Michael Morcombe, Steve Parish Publishing Pty Ltd, Archerfield.
384 Pp. rrp \$34.95

This book is basically a rehash of Morcombe's unique Field Guide to Australian Birds that was published in 2000, but this is a "pocket size" format field guide, *albeit* for very big pockets.

It contains most of the information that was included in the larger format book, though the introduction is shorter and the valuable section on nest and eggs and Australian territorial island species have been omitted to facilitate the smaller format. The useful colour coded cross-referencing and indexing systems developed for the original book have been brought forward to this version of the field guide. Morcombe has included minor updates and feedback from birders that related to the earlier book.

This version brings forward the unique user-friendly concepts from its larger predecessor. The text, identification information and updated distribution maps are placed around the illustration for each species, so the complete account for each species appears on one page only. This field guide also introduces another unique feature — it has a ribbon page marker, so you do not lose your place when you put the book down for another squiz through your binoculars.

The Compact Edition is a very good, conveniently sized field guide and companion for the binocular-toting bird enthusiast and a copy belongs in the backpack, or car, more than in the home reference library. I commend it to casual bird observers, dedicated bird watchers and field ornithologists alike.

J. W. Hardy