

REVIEW

Nocturnal Birds of Australia, by Richard Schodde and Ian J. Mason, illustrated by Jeremy T. Boot. Lansdowne Editions, Melbourne, 1980. 136 pages, including 22 full page colour plates and 21 maps. Approx. 31 x 42cm. Price \$350.00.

This voluptuous limited edition presents comprehensive accounts of taxonomy, behaviour and ecology for the Rufous Night Heron, Letter-winged Kite, Bush Thick-knee, Night Parrot, four hawk owls (Powerful, Rufous, Barking, Boobook), five masked owls (Sooty, Lesser Sooty, Masked, Barn, Grass), three frogmouths (Marbled, Papuan, Tawny), Australian Owlet-nightjar and three nightjars (White-throated, Spotted, Large-tailed). This sequence expresses a revised assessment of relationships. In this total of 20 species, six binomial combinations differ from those of Condon (1975, RAOU Checklist, Non-passerines): *Burhinus grallarius*; *Pezoporus occidentalis*; *Ninox boobook*, separated from *N. novaeseelandiae*; *Tyto capensis*; *Eurostopodus mystacalis*; *E. argus*, formerly *guttatus*. Also, *Tyto (tenebricosa) multipunctata* of north Queensland is considered a distinct species and named Lesser Sooty Owl. Changes of binomial names also encompass some diurnal species, as shown by detailed comment upon *Elanus axillaris* (Black-shouldered Kite) and oblique reference to *Cacatua pastinator* (corella of south-western Australia). As a consequence of this great incidence of changes, implicitly sanctioned by the compiler of the passerine part of the RAOU Checklist (Schodde), it is clear that modern checklists do little to confer stability. Rather, these lists become defacto subjects for argument among taxonomists, and as such ought not be adopted prematurely.

Recognition of the Lesser Sooty Owl is one of the most likely aspects to excite notice to the book. However, evidence for the newly conceived status of this owl is not compelling. Ecogeographic characters invoked for support could equally be used to relegate it to its traditional subspecific status. The meagre tangible evidence concerns a proportionate difference in leg size between the sexes of Sooty Owl, in contrast to supposed similarity in size in the Lesser Sooty. Because this is based upon only eight specimens, I would require incontestable evidence that all were correctly sexed. I have found that male Sooty Owls are more territorially assertive than females and therefore more likely to be collected. Whether by intent or accident, the illustrations vivify the concept of two species by depicting dark individuals of the Sooty. However, in northern New South Wales I have observed several with ventral plumage approaching that depicted for the Lesser Sooty.

Despite its conventional organisation for reference purposes, the text may be relished for its elegance and sensitivity. Yet there are curious lapses into long phrases of scientific jargon that appear as weeds in an otherwise well tended garden. Fortunately there is a glossary that copes with most of the noxious examples. Generally, the accuracy of information is creditable, considering its largely anecdotal basis. However, I am disappointed by the sometimes perfunctory or misleading treatment of geographic distribution, such as for the Marbled Frogmouth. The southern subspecies is not recorded to occur "inland to eastern scarp of

Great Dividing Range", except perhaps near Dorrigo. In the centre of its distribution there are no records west of the Lamington Plateau, Tweed Range or Grafton. On this subject, some observers will be surprised by the discounting of all records of Masked Owl greater than 300 km. inland. Also, it may be useful to state here that the Boobook, Sooty Owl and Owlet-nightjar do in fact commonly inhabit rainforests, well distant from eucalypts. Errors concerning other aspects seem to derive from the authors' lack of critical field experience with several species. For example, none of the calls of the Marbled Frogmouth could be described as whistling. Accordingly, the rather confident and literal interpretation of some unpublished information seems unwarranted. An example concerns nesting of the Rufous Owl, in which "each female begins at the same time every year".

The colour plates do not attain the consistency of Cooper, but portray all species adequately. I am impressed most by the Letter-winged Kite, Barking Owl, Sooty Owl and (perching) Masked Owl. Some illustrations seem lifeless (Powerful and Barn Owls) and others lack correct proportion (Night Heron, Rufous Owl). The Lesser Sooty Owl seems mammalian. I am pleased to see that the diagnostic pointed tail of the Marbled Frogmouth is clearly shown, in contrast to the differently shaped and relatively short tail of the Tawny. There was scope to portray at least one nightjar perched or flying, instead of all three among leaf litter. The eye of the Large-tailed Nightjar is too large and liquid.

In summary, this is a significant book that compliments rather than supplants the excellent 'Nightwatchmen of Bush and Plain' by David Fleay (1968, Jacaranda Press). I have been endlessly entertained by both, though it must be confessed I am infatuated with night birds. Considering the high price of the former, such fervour is perhaps necessary for its purchase. However, the more practical purchaser will be undertaking a discriminating monetary investment.

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