

CORELLA

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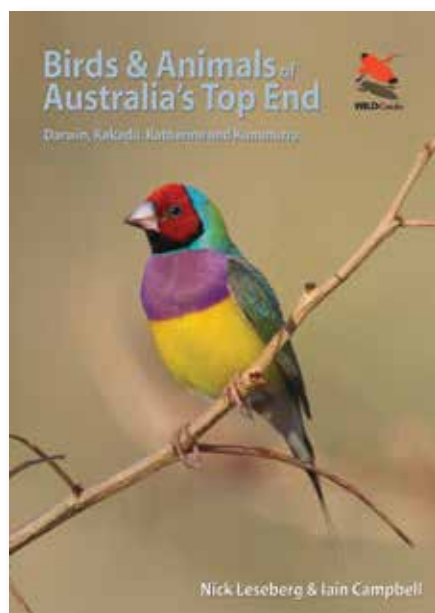
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Book Review



Birds & Animals of Australia's Top End. Darwin, Kakadu, Katherine, and Kununurra

Nick Leseberg and Iain Campbell 2015. Princeton University Press. Paperback, 272 pp, coloured photographs. ISBN: 978-0-691-16146-4. RRP US\$19.57

The authors state that this book is to be an “accessible” guide for the visiting “novice wildlife-watcher” to use in the field, and that is indeed what they have delivered. It is attractively and copiously illustrated with good-quality colour photographs, yet small enough (A5) to be carried around in a day pack or bag. It covers over 200 species of commonly-encountered birds and 24 mammals, along with some rarer but particularly interesting species (Gouldian Finch, of course) and a selection of reptiles (39) and amphibians (16) that are readily identified. For each species, text is provided covering where and how to find them, how to identify them and some ecological and other notes. Brief introductory sections cover geography and geology, weather, habitats and how and where to watch wildlife.

The authors are tour guides and I can imagine that this book would fit many of their clients’ needs well. Indeed, with the authors at-times quite anecdotal style of writing they may well have in mind those for whom English is a second language. And why not? Isn’t wildlife watching a major motivation for most who visit the Top End? And even if that scarcely extends beyond seeing a Saltwater Crocodile and a few waterbirds at Fogg Dam, the Top End is surely the perfect region to inspire deeper interest.

Birds are presented in four sections covering wetlands and beaches, raptors, forests and open areas. Forests include mangroves and monsoon forests, and open areas are defined to include treed savannas as well as grasslands. The distinction between these last two classes is at time problematic. For

example, the Rainbow (Red-collared) Lorikeet and Helmeted Friarbird appear in the “open” section, where at least – and more usefully – they sits alongside the Varied Lorikeet and Little and Silver-crowned Friarbirds respectively. This suggests to me that a merger of these two classes would have been helpful.

I fact-checked the introductory sections and a selection of texts about species I know well. On this count I’d rate this book as reasonable rather than outstanding, not inspiringly informative and occasionally inaccurate. Nowhere near “all animals need to ... drink” (cf p21). It is hardly true that the Aboriginal harvest of Magpie Geese is “managed” as implied on page 26. I question whether the Rainbow Pitta starts to call and breed in September (p106) when the dry season is often at its most intense. It might technically be true that the cause of the decline of the Gouldian Finch is “unknown” (p193) but we’re certain enough to implement corrective land management in key areas. And while movements of the Little Red Flying-fox are less predictable than those of the Black Flying-fox, neither species moves randomly so the former can’t move “more randomly” (p213). But for a general audience, perhaps I’m being a little nitpicky.

This is not a comprehensive guide to identification or where to find species, and does not claim to be. It won’t help you distinguish immature friarbirds. The Gouldian Finch is illustrated with red- and black-headed adult males; all we’re told about juvenile Gouldian Finches is that they’re “much paler and less colourful than the adults”, and the paler females don’t get a guernsey of any sort. Nor, beyond the most basic level, is it informative about the ecology of the area and the biology of its species. Even if they’ve never been to the Top End before, experienced bird watchers and ecologically-minded naturalists will doubtless want more, and I do not recommend this book to them. But if you’ve a friend about to tour the Top End who is an incipient or occasional wildlife watcher, or simply spends time camping, this could well be the perfect introduction and an excellent gift.

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