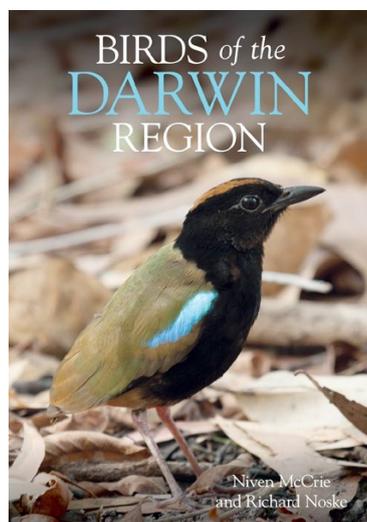


Book Review



Birds of the Darwin Region

Niven McCrie and Richard Noske, 2015. CSIRO Publishing. Paperback, 464 pp, colour photographs, maps, graphs. ISBN: 9781486300341. RRP \$79.95.

Darwin, Australia's smallest capital city, is situated in the north-west Top End of the Northern Territory on the shores of the Timor Sea, a region subject to a monsoonal climate with distinct 'wet' and 'dry' seasons. This climate shapes local habitats and hence its fauna. The Top End is world-famous for the extensive floodplains and wetlands of Kakadu National Park, but the Darwin region itself holds a diversity of habitats, and a diversity of bird species. Darwin's 323 resident birds, seasonal migrants and visitors, and vagrants are treated in detail in a new book, *Birds of the Darwin Region*.

Neither a field guide nor a site guide, the book serves more as a specialised reference source summarizing local occurrence and ecology, and will be of interest to academics, amateur ornithologists and birdwatchers. The value of this book largely lies in its documentation of locally-specific information, which has nowhere else been summarized in this manner. Information on wide-ranging species contained in Australian field guides and other reference sources often originates from southern and eastern Australia, but ecology, particularly breeding, can differ considerably in the monsoonal tropics.

The introductory sections of the book cover a brief history of ornithology in Darwin, local climate, the avifauna (including bird movements and breeding in a seasonal context) and habitats. These sections provide a solid grounding in topics that influence the distribution and occurrence of birds within the region. An 'About this book' section follows, outlining the data sources used to create distribution maps and seasonality charts for each species.

Each species account opens with a brief summary of global range, broad habitats, status in the Darwin region, and breeding season. It would have been useful to include any threatened species listings in this opening information (sometimes included in the species account text). A colour photograph is provided for most species, although a few photos are inexplicably lacking (King Quail and Grey-headed

Honeyeater are two examples), and likely could have been sourced from local photographers. The photographs are generally of high quality, and so it is a shame that they are small and not a more prominent feature of each species account considering the size of the volume.

A map of occurrence and chart of seasonality is provided with each species account for all but the vagrant species. A considerable amount of data has gone into creating the maps and charts, but the maps themselves are difficult to quickly interpret. Rather than displaying point records, the maps use a grid system with black and grey dots of different sizes to indicate reporting rates for a species within an individual grid. The maps don't contain any labels or location names and so require constant reference to the 'About this book' section to understand where birds occur, especially for anyone not familiar with the layout of Darwin. An alternative mapping approach may have been more illustrative. The seasonality charts are more useful, and provide a quick visualization of wet and dry season occurrence. The text within the species accounts is extensive, summarising details of local distribution, habitat, seasonality and breeding through comprehensively reviewing records and literature.

Interstate birdwatchers may find the book of interest in relation to the occurrence of Darwin's specialist species, for example Darwin is the sole Australian locality in which to reliably and regularly see Little Ringed Plover (an uncommon migrant as specified in the book, as opposed to its previous branding as a vagrant to Australia). Darwin's northern location (closer to Indonesia than to any other Australian capital city) has seen some 61 vagrant species recorded. The city therefore arguably rivals any Australian location for vagrant species, and the short species accounts of vagrants, along with accounts of 11 unconfirmed birds which follows the main species treatments in the book, will likely be of particular interest to birdwatchers. Perhaps most importantly though, *Birds of the Darwin Region* will hopefully serve to encourage researchers to identify knowledge gaps worthy of study, and local birdwatchers and amateur ornithologists to accurately document and publish new information specific to the region.

The authors, like many writing about the northern Australian environment, flora and fauna, state that habitats are near-pristine, and in the case of birds, that Darwin hosts no established exotic species. These factors are important for ensuring a persisting natural bird community, but the former point is somewhat misleading, and while importantly the Top End's major waterways remain largely intact, the region, including Darwin, is far from pristine. Weeds, fire management and feral animals (in particular pigs and water buffaloes) are all changing the landscape and its habitats, and have had considerable negative impacts on a number of bird species. Furthermore, the current rhetoric around the large-scale development of northern Australia, with Darwin at its epicentre, will place further pressure on habitats and birds. In this context, *Birds of the Darwin Region* provides a valuable reference source to understand and monitor bird populations and their response to a rapidly-changing urban landscape

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