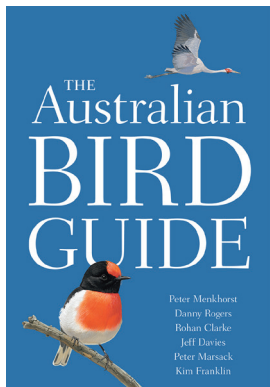


## Book Review



### The Australian Bird Guide

Menkhorst, P., Rogers, D., Clarke, R., Davies, J., Marsack, P. and Franklin, K. 2017. CSIRO Publishing. Paperback 560 pp, colour plates and maps. ISBN: 978-0-691-17301-6. RRP \$39.95

This magnificent book is a game changer. Open it and the illustrations leap out of the pages, they look like real birds. Read the amazingly informative text and it is like talking to a birder, and that

is no surprise because the authors and artists are birders and they have communicated assiduously with the birding community during the nine years that it took to complete this project. It is a wonderful collaborative effort, building especially on the work of BirdLife Australia, including the Atlas and BirdData projects that were used to generate the distribution maps (compiled by Glen Ehmke and Liam Hanel), *The Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds* and the rise of digital photography and birding in isolated outposts where new species are found at increasing rates. It is a credit to all, and especially to the team of authors (Peter Menkhorst, Danny Rogers and Rohan Clarke) and artists (Jeff Davies, Peter Marsack and Kim Franklin) and to John Manger of CSIRO Publishing who had the vision to initiate the project and see it through.

This is by far the most comprehensive field guide to the birds of the Australasian region, not only because of the number of species covered (936), but also because it shows details of many plumages for each species (relating to age, sex and identifiable subspecies). The guide covers all species known to have occurred in Australia and its island dependencies (not Antarctica) from 1940 to February 2013, including endemics from Christmas Island, Lord Howe Island and Norfolk Island that have not previously been illustrated in continental field guides, along with newly discovered species (e.g. “New Caledonian” Storm-Petrel; splits of quail-thrushes and grasswrens). At least two species are included on the basis of satellite tracking (Amsterdam Albatross and Magenta Petrel). Novel information is provided on likely-to-be-split taxa (e.g. Eurasian and Australian breeding Gull-billed Terns) and “rediscovered” species, such as the Night Parrot. Many recently found “vagrant” species are illustrated for the first time in an Australian guide, helpfully arranged on the same pages as related species and clearly marked as vagrants. Many new plumages are shown for widespread species, often based on original research using digital photographs by birders. This should help accurate identification and ageing of seabirds, shorebirds, gulls, skuas and terns, and difficult groups of land birds (e.g. Collared Sparrowhawk vs. Brown Goshawk; *Myiagra* flycatchers; *Meliphaga* honeyeaters; corvids). It is sad to see the Paradise Parrot excluded (having become extinct before 1940) and a shame that the Corncrake missed out (being seen before and just after this period), but limits had to be set. Taxonomy follows the International Ornithologists Union list version 5.4 (2015) and English names follow the BirdLife Australia Working List of Australian Birds (version 2) to maintain stability.

Comprehensive guides can be daunting for beginners, but this one is so beautifully laid out that it should not present a problem. Full texts and distribution maps accompany each plate, sensibly ordered in colour-coded sections for seabirds, other waterbirds and land birds (much more useful than a strict, taxonomic order). Visual and alphabetical quick-reference pages to bird groups are provided at the front, as well as a checklist and index at the back. Thin border-lines are used to group multiple images of each species on a plate. Helpful vignettes within plates show soaring profiles of raptors and groups of similar species together e.g. terns of different size. Text begins with measurements (wing-chord, bill length and weight, a welcome innovation) and key identification features, and continues with voice and “notes”, including habitat. Symbols show a “likelihood of encounter” score within the range of each species (a welcome revival of an old concept used overseas). Maps are clear, and based on modelled data from BirdLife projects. They show distributions of subspecies (in different colours) and areas where species are either more likely or less likely to occur (dark or light shading). Introductory sections are provided on how to use the book, identifying birds and birding in Australia (with pragmatic advice on ethical birding and documenting records). The descriptions of feather tracts and moult are the most helpful that I have read. Leo Joseph (CSIRO) has provided a thoughtful and succinct guide to the evolution and classification of Australian birds, explaining with humour why these things matter, why they are of interest and why the classifications must keep changing. Such sections are never the primary focus of a field guide, but here all are excellent and deserve to be widely read.

With so much new information there are bound to be points of contention. The index of English names lists species by first name not group name. Seasonal movements are not shown explicitly in the maps, but are generally well described in the notes. I was interested to read about the walking and standing behaviour of Eastern Ground Parrots, but would have liked more emphasis on their habit of flying low when flushed, and their need for largely treeless habitats (a crucial element for Ground Parrots and Night Parrots i.e. the genus *Pezoporus*). The sections on voice deserve more coverage, but voice is notoriously hard to describe verbally. The lively song is described for the Western Spinebill but not the Eastern Spinebill, and it would have been helpful to mention that the repeated piping of spinebills is more rapid and variable in speed than the repetitive calls of the Eastern Yellow Robin and White-throated Treecreeper. The guide sets out to describe the main calls of all species, but omits some secondary calls (e.g. the musical trill of the White-eared Honeyeater, which can be confused with Lewin’s Honeyeater, and the harsh contact calls of Pilotbirds).

Some of the shorebird maps may give the false impression that certain species never visit southern Australia (e.g. Oriental Pratincole, Oriental Plover, Little Curlew and Asian Dowitcher), whereas all have occurred there with varying frequency. Perhaps arrows could have been used to show occasional vagrancy (as discussed in the text), and I agree that there is little point in mapping vagrant records more precisely. Two species (Lesser Sand Plover and Grey-tailed Tattler) are rightly shown as

occurring at Corner Inlet in south-eastern Victoria, but not in Western Port or Port Phillip, both of which supported regular small populations until recently, despite declining numbers. The map for the Great Knot (a strictly coastal species) wrongly shows it as occurring across much of inland south-eastern Australia, including the Alps (this *must* be the wrong map), and the map for the Red Knot does not show its spasmodic occurrence at inland salt lakes in the lowlands of that region. More importantly, the notes for the Black-faced Sheathbill fail to mention the endemic subspecies that inhabits Heard Island (one of the sub-Antarctic dependencies covered by the guide), and wrongly mention a beach-washed bird on Phillip Island as the only record (that was a Magellanic Penguin: this must be a

misplaced sentence, not a misidentification!). These issues are easily fixed and unlikely to mislead.

Despite these quibbles, I noticed no errors likely to produce misidentifications. I feel as if I am standing in front of a Van Gogh, suggesting improvements. This guide is indeed a masterpiece, and will provide hours of fun and education for thousands of birders and prospective birders, with reams of exciting new information for all. It will help foster a new generation of well-informed people to observe, record and conserve birds and the habitats that sustain us all. Congratulations on a hugely significant new leap forward!

Richard H. Loyn.

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## Editor's Note

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**Use of ultraviolet light to help age nightjars, owlet-nightjars, frogmouths and owls** by M.D. Blythman and J.L. Sansom, *Corella* 40(4): 98-99.

It has been drawn to the editor's attention that some appropriate attributions were omitted from this short paper. Most importantly, Michael Lohr of Edith Cowan University should have been included among the authors, particularly because of his role in initiating this project. Acknowledgement of the supportive roles of Neil Hamilton and Veronica Newbury in the project is also appropriate.