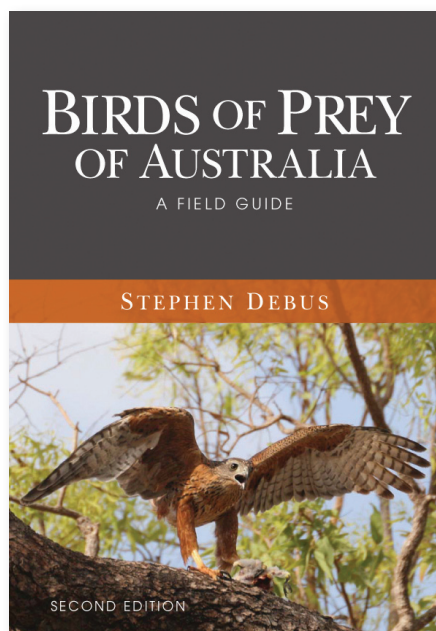


Book Review



Birds of Prey of Australia – A Field Guide (Second Edition)

Stephen Debus. 2012. CSIRO Publishing. Paperback, 208 pp. ISBN 9780643104365. RRP \$39.95.

The title differs from the first edition solely by dropping “The” as the first word in the title. But there the resemblance ends.

The first edition was basically a rehash of the field identification components of diurnal raptors from Volume 2 of the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds (HANZAB) with the addition of a few colour photographs. Sure, it was in basic field guide style and size, but was it really a specialists’ field guide and was it any better for field ID than the general Australian bird field guides of the day? I had my doubts!

Now we have the second edition – well, it wouldn’t be appropriate to just say it’s “a different kettle of fish” – I believe that Stephen Debus has now created a true specialist field guide to the diurnal raptors of Australia. In the preface we are informed that the impetus for a second edition came from demand for its 2001 predecessor, even though data presented in it were more than 15 years out of date. But Stephen wasn’t satisfied with a cosmetic update of the original publication. He did a complete revision, rewrite and reformatting that incorporates new knowledge and a new and impressive concept to compare species that might be confused in flight. The new edition still incorporates a concise overview of raptor biology, but it has also converted the original HANZAB extract into a comprehensive guide to the field diagnostic character of all of Australia’s diurnal raptors in a far more useful and informative format.

Each species has a double page spread that presents illustrations, including flight profiles, size and plumage descriptions of age classes and also draws attention to similar species. This concept alone elevates the value of the book to true field guide status. But then the really exceptional concept of “split-images” is introduced to clearly illustrate differences between species that might be confused with each other.

The field guide value is then enhanced even further by the inclusion of diagnostic in-flight photographs of all species. This is followed by a handbook section that presents information on distribution, food and hunting, behavior, breeding, threats to and conservation of each species. The final chapters discuss the broad threats, conservation and the future for raptors and present a glossary and species specific bibliography.

If you acquired the first edition you might be tempted to ignore an updated second edition. FAIL! Retire the first edition to the bookshelf. You *must* have a copy of the second edition in the driver’s door pocket of your vehicle.

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