REVIEW

The Atlas of Australian Birds, by M. Blakers, S. J. J. F. Davies and P. N. Reilly, 1984. Melbourne University Press. 738 + xlvi pp. $49.00 + overlays, $6.00.

As birds are among the most mobile of living creatures and are affected considerably by climatic conditions or food requirements, it has been quoted that distribution maps can never substantially convey distinct distribution data. On the other hand there are many of us who have acquired an immense interest in defining species range limitations, because it adds immeasureably to a person's interest in field ornithology. Certainly successful breeding may eventually cause range extensions of certain birds. Conversely, drought and persecution may well cause restrictions, but normally such circumstances are a gradational process, only causing noticeable differences over a considerable period of time.

One of the most important contributions of this *Atlas* is to the study of zoogeography. There is now a lot of controversy over ways of doing such an analysis (at least three competing methods). But as it all begins with a basic definition of distribution patterns at the species level, the contribution by this publication is most welcome. Its approach compares in particular with *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland.* Without much extra effort, however, it could have contained information which would compare it to *An Atlas of Speciation in African Passerine Birds* (Hall and Moreau 1970) and *An Atlas of Speciation in African Non-passerine Birds* (Snow 1978).

The first two paragraphs of the introduction to the Australian Atlas clearly explain both the dubiety of such an undertaking, as well as the joy of a successful achievement. The three authors, the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (R.A.O.U.), as well as the able assistants and the vast assemblage of people who contributed during the five-year period (1977-1981) and Melbourne University Press, deserve the fullest commendation by all who use this book. It is only necessary to scan the distribution data given in the R.A.O.U.'s *Official Checklist of Australian Birds* (1926) and compare some of the vague range information in that volume with those mapped in the *Atlas.* The two species of *Hylacola* might be used as random examples to illustrate this further. The "N.S.W., Vic., S.A. (Mt. Lofty Ra.)" abbreviated summary for *pyrrhopygia* and the "N.S.W.-Vic. S.W.A." for *cauta* in that earlier book contrast noticeably with the restricted limitations now known for each of the states concerned. It may seem ironic to compare this *Atlas* with a 1926 publication, but it should be remembered that the latter is still the last complete official R.A.O.U. checklist.

Information in *The Atlas of Australian Birds* should provide a major reference source for years to come, since previously sifting out the data from great numbers of other publications was time-consuming work. Yet there will be many of us who will feel some satisfaction that so much of what had been previously compiled (maps in books by Peter Slater, J. D. Macdonald and Graham Pizzey, Readers Digest *Complete Book of Australian Birds,* the National Photographic Index *Wrens and Warblers of Australia,* etc.) bears a considerable agreement to what we now know to be as clearly defined as possible. It may bear some similarity to the general practitioner's feelings of elation and satisfaction when the diagnosis is vindicated by the specialist. Any individual range-map delineator would have the same enthusiasm when he or she now finds that what they carefully prepared bears a similarity to this more specific work of so many.

The comprehensiveness of this *Atlas* might be emphasized by quoting figures from the data sources; 89 134 record sheets, 2 715 413 records and 716 species (581 breeding spp.) covered, gives some idea of the involvement. Only two endemics managed to evade the searchers over 885 1° grid blocks during the five-year period of the survey, these being the Buff-breasted Button-quail and Paradise Parrot. The absence of the latter species may be no great surprise, but that *Turnix olivei* was missed is noteworthy (its near-relative in New Caledonia has also become a mystery). For thoroughness it should be pointed out that 1 929 references are cited.

A few additional species were known from only one or two degree blocks. Some which have given cause for concern during recent years include the Orange-bellied Parrot (152 Atlas records), Noisy Scrub-bird (19), Eyrean Grasswren (18), Marbled Frogmouth (14), Golden-shouldered Parrot (7), Night Parrot (4) and Carpentarian Grasswren (2). It should be emphasized that reasons for concern may be through apparent dwindling numbers or the very remoteness of their range prevents regular observation. In some instances in the foregoing list, however, the number of one degree squares from which the records came are seriously small. Opposing that situation might be quoted a bird not often recorded in recent years, the Scarlet-chested Parrot, for which there were 25 sightings from no fewer than 23 different degree blocks.

For those of us who might reside in metropolitan areas where introductions far outnumber native birds, there is some consolation in knowing that in the overall Atlas recordings nine true Australians precede the most widespread of those brought in by man. These are, in density order, the Australian Magpie, Willie Wagtail, Australian Magpie-lark, Welcome Swallow, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, Galah, White-faced Heron, Laughing Kookaburra and Australian Kestrel. Nevertheless, it is difficult to realise that the

last-mentioned of that group was recorded more often than either the Common Starling or House Sparrow. Where some of us south-eastern suburban-dwellers reside, it is probable that up to 500 Starlings or Common Mynas would be seen for every Kestrel. For the nine Australian Atlas regions (N.S.W. and the Northern Territory were divided for Atlas purposes) it is of interest to comment that the Magpie topped the records in four regions, the Magpie-lark in two, Willie Wagtail in two and the Forest Raven in one (Tasmania).

There is a strong possibility that accuracy of the data may be queried, when so many people were involved. Have we that number of competent field ornithologists in Australia among that number of observers? Are some of the marginal or isolated records acceptable? Of course, in such an undertaking as this a few erroneous sightings are likely, but I know, from personal involvement, every employment was adopted to substantiate any dubious observation.

Although it is stated that the *Recommended English Names for Australian Birds* (1978) was followed for all common names, it should have been remembered that numerous able field ornithologists ('birdwatchers' if you wish) still use other English names that have been long in use. This, and various other publications wishing to foster any recommended change, should place the older alternative name in brackets in the heading. In the Index (pp. 730-738) quite a few of these supplanted names are given, quoting the respective species to which they belong. The cross reference system adopted in 1978 should have been repeated and possibly enlarged upon in the *Atlas,* adding little to its bulk. It is disappointing to find omitted even in the Index such common names of long-standing as Red-backed Sea-Eagle, Red-sided Parrot, Golden Bronze-Cuckoo, Plumed Frogmouth, Rainbow-bird, Brown Whistler, Chestnut-breasted Quail-Thrush, Samphire Thornbill, Western Bowerbird, Silver-backed Butcherbird and Clinking Currawong, to mention just a few that come readily to mind. The 1978 publication is exactly what it states — a list of *recommended* names and certainly with such there is no Law of Priority that governs taxonomic usage. Only time, not dictatorship, will ensure that the best popular title for every Australian bird will be resolved.

The varying quality of the vignettes should be emphasized, not to mention erratic problems of scale and proportions. In comparison they are distinctly inferior to a somewhat similar set of black-and-white artistry, agreeing to some extent in adaptation, by Neville H. P. Cayley in A. J. North's *Nests and Eggs of Birds found breeding in Australia and Tasmania* (4 volumes 1901-1914). Another aspect of regret concerns the overlays, sold separately ($6.00), but which are so important in a clear understanding of distribution when studying any map that they should have been part and parcel of the original purchase. The 'artificial' divisions into which each map is divided may have been helpful in compilation, but most users of the *Atlas* will regret that state boundaries have been ignored.

The 38 species detailed in the Historical Maps (pp. 660-670), depicting either a notable increase or decrease during three time periods — prior to 1901, 1901-1950 and 1950-1976, are most informative. Noticeable in this section are introductions, such as the Starling, Myna, Goldfinch, House and Tree Sparrows, Blackbird, Skylark and Nutmeg Mannikin, but some natives such as the Little Egret, Sacred Ibis, Cattle Egret, Crested Pigeon, Little Corella, Maned Duck, Yellow-billed Spoonbill and Crested Grebe indicate surprising range increases. Apparent declines are similarly noticeable as with the Thick-billed Grasswren, Paradise Parrot, Alexandra's (Princess) Parrot and Star Finch. If this section could have been greatly augmented then an extremely useful book would have been assured of even wider appeal.

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New Members

BRADLEY, Dr R. A., Sydney, N.S.W.
BRENNAN, K. G., Jabiru, N.T.
BROWN, G. K., Merewether, N.S.W.
FISK, P., St. Lucia, Qld.
HARDACRE, K. H., Mosman, N.S.W.
HIGGINS, D., Woodford, N.S.W.
HILLS, S. J. & J. L., Edgeroi, N.S.W.
JOHNSON, S. J., Dudley, N.S.W.
JONES, M. E. ,Armidale, N.S.W.
MULLETTE, Dr K. J., Mt Riverview, N.S.W.
REAY-YOUNG, P., Coogee, N.S.W.
SECOMB, D. A., Nambucca Heads, N.S.W.
WEBSTER, N.G., North Balwyn, Vic.
WOOD, K., Mangerton, N.S.W.

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