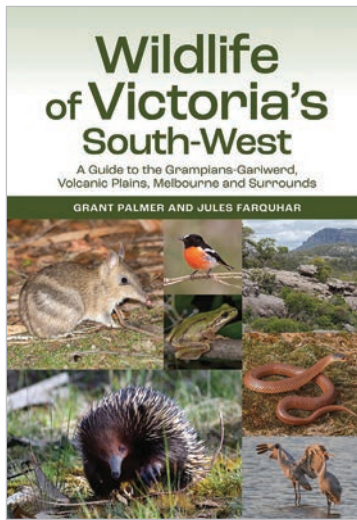


## Book Review



**Wildlife of Victoria's South-West: A Guide to the Grampians-Gariwerd, Volcanic Plains, Melbourne and Surrounds:** Grant Palmer and Jules Farquhar 2024. CSIRO Publishing. Paperback, 416 pp. Colour photographs and maps. ISBN: 9781486313051. RRP Au\$ 44.99.

As the latest instalment in CSIRO Publishing's esteemed series of regional wildlife guides, this volume on south-west Victoria arrives with considerable expectations. It is an ambitious and handsome book, seeking to catalogue the mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians across a vast and ecologically vital portion of the state. The introductory chapters immediately establish a high standard. The authors skilfully set the ecological stage, providing an excellent overview of the region's diverse bioregions, distinctive geology, major land uses and the pressing conservation issues. This contextual framing is crucial and elevates the book beyond a simple identification guide.

The book's definition of 'south-west Victoria', however, presents something of a cartographic puzzle. The area covered is a complex polygon stretching from the South Australian border to the Mornington Peninsula, encompassing Melbourne and Port Phillip Bay. By excluding the Otway Ranges (covered in Palmer's earlier book, *Wildlife of the Otways and the Shipwreck Coast*), the region feels less like a cohesive biogeographical entity and more like an assemblage of territories left over from previous publications.

The true heart of the guide lies in its 432 native species accounts. Here, the text is factual but user-friendly, striking a difficult balance with proficiency and moving beyond simple identification to paint a fuller ecological picture. The scientific rigour is high, though keeping pace with taxonomic shifts is an ongoing challenge for any print publication. The easy-to-follow format covers key identification features, vocalisations and distribution, with refreshingly helpful notes on distinguishing similar species. Furthermore, the 'Ecology' sections provide practical, field-related details—including feeding habits, social behaviour and even the temperament of snakes upon encounter—that are scant in many other guides. The inclusion of a separate, concise section on introduced species is a pragmatic decision, allowing users to quickly determine the status of an observed animal. To cap it off, the final chapter on key wildlife viewing spots offers targeted advice usually reserved for dedicated birding guides, providing valuable tips on access and likely encounters that should entice visitors and local naturalists alike.

Despite these textual strengths, the guide is hampered by significant flaws in its visual presentation. The data-rich distribution maps, for instance, are printed at a scale that challenges legibility; discerning place names or individual records requires considerable effort. More critically, the maps appear to lack a historical cut-off date, creating a potentially misleading picture of a species' current range. The records for the Regent Honeyeater, for instance, represent a ghost distribution for a species now functionally extinct in the region. The reader must therefore learn to treat the maps as historical documents and rely on the text for an accurate assessment of presence.

This unforgiving rigidity extends to the photographic layout. While the vast majority of images are of a very high standard, a rigid design template leads to inconsistent and often frustrating results. The decision to force all images into a landscape format means tall animals are awkwardly cropped; the Eastern Grey Kangaroo (p. 103), for instance, is rendered without its legs or tail. In other cases, the cropping is simply too tight even for subjects that suit the orientation, such as the Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross (p. 243) with its clipped wingtips or the Lace Monitor (p. 293) missing much of its length. The opposite problem also occurs: some subjects, like the Latham's Snipe (p. 240), are presented as too small within the frame and would have benefited from being cropped more tightly. Add to this a few images that are simply too dark to appreciate fully, and the design choices feel particularly restrictive. The near-square image of the Wandering Albatross (p. 242) is a rare exception to the landscape rule, suggesting a possible design error rather than intentional variation. A more dynamic approach, incorporating portrait or varied sizing and more considered cropping, would have allowed these superb photographs to be displayed to their full potential.

A final noteworthy inclusion is the 'Other wildlife of Victoria's South-West' section (p. 349 onwards), which provides a handy list of extinct species, rarer visitors, offshore seabirds, and other uncommonly-encountered taxa. While this is a valuable addition, the criteria for a species' inclusion in the main accounts versus this rear section are somewhat opaque. For instance, the Sooty Shearwater (p. 246) is featured in the main body despite being described as 'Rare to uncommon inshore', while the Hutton's Shearwater (p. 354), also viewed from the coastline, is relegated to the rear. Similarly, the Cape Gannet (p. 354) is placed in this latter section, despite annual records of its presence, and even breeding, among the Point Danger Australasian Gannet colony. These minor points, however, do not detract from the high standard of the guide.

On a cultural front, the inclusion of a map of the region's Aboriginal language groups—a feature most nature guides omit—is a progressive and important step. The authors have clearly made a respectful effort to include Indigenous species names where known, acknowledging the complexities of this task in the introduction. Yet, presenting this information without a deeper framework of First Nations partnership walks a fine line, highlighting the ongoing challenge for modern guides to move beyond respectful inclusion towards genuine collaboration.

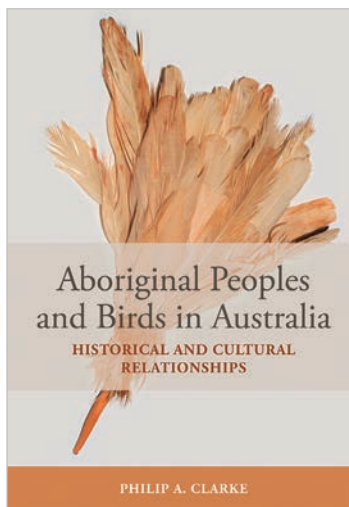
In conclusion, the book's profound textual and informational strengths largely outweigh its design weaknesses. The richness of the information presented is a testament to the authors' dedication and passion in bringing this important book to the market. While there are significant quibbles over the maps and photo layout, these are design issues that will no doubt be corrected in future editions and should not be the deciding factor when considering a purchase. *Wildlife of Victoria's South-West*

is an excellent and detailed compilation. It is a splendid, single-volume resource that will undoubtedly enrich the experience of any naturalist, researcher or land manager exploring this large and diverse region.

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## Book Review



**Aboriginal Peoples and Birds in Australia: Historical and Cultural Relationships.** Philip A. Clarke 2023. CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne. Paperback, 332 pp. Colour photographs. ISBN 9781486315970. RRP Au\$59.99,

*Aboriginal Peoples and Birds in Australia* amasses a large volume of Indigenous knowledge. Nine chapters of varying length cover birds in a variety of roles: food, environmental, medicinal and cultural.

Philip Clarke is a former South Australian Museum anthropologist and now an independent consultant, whose published research is based extensively on collaboration with Ngarrindjeri language groups of the Lower Murray River and Lakes of South Australia. His subject will interest anyone who wants to learn what Aboriginal Australians know of our birds or gain insight into Aboriginal culture generally.

The author succeeds in his objective only in part. First, he exaggerates the differences between indigenous and non-indigenous ways of interpreting nature and makes his subject appear more esoteric than it need be. Second, there are many errors, and some are inexcusable.

Clarke writes that the book concerns 'a group of organisms that Europeans refer to as birds' and that its contents derive from 'obscure historical sources' 'hidden in often hard to find places', thus emphasising the extent of his research. His claim of 'obscure historical sources' is exaggerated. Many citations are from readily available texts and published sources are overlooked. Tidemann (2009), on birds and fire, cited around 20 papers not referred to by Clarke on the topic. Water is essential for survival, but there is nothing on birds and water (*cf.* Tidemann and Whiteside 2007).

He states that non-Western ethnobiological classification is not based on evolutionary relationships. Why would we expect it to be? Close cultural relationships with birds are found 'across the world', so the subject should not be obscure. Yet much of the

book stresses that Indigenous Australians regard birds differently from Europeans. This proposition is simplistic and over-worked.

Clarke is inconsistent. After criticising Mountford's accounts of 'folklore', he cites Mountford as a credible source. He generalises: 'Scholars once believed...' with one reference. 'The Aboriginal panacea for all wounds was emu fat and ochre' (one reference); this is incorrect.

Clarke asserts that people-animal-people behaviours are often difficult to distinguish between, but this is only difficult from a western perspective, not Aboriginal, in which beings 'flip-flop' with ease.

Organisation of material within headings is poor and the text leaps around. In 'Birds as Ancestors', he introduces central Australian women's narrative about edible seeds. Frequent references to chapters forward and backward suggest lack of structured ideas. There are a number of irrelevant comments and far too much repetition. There are nine mentions of 'colonist James Dawson' and almost every author cited more than once is repeatedly and distractingly labelled 'anthropologist', 'archaeologist', 'doctor and anthropologist' and so on.

The author's lack of knowledge of systematic ornithology is understandable and his failure to obtain ornithological advice is therefore perplexing and a limitation to the book's value. He reasons that a 'black, white and brown-coloured "stilt" with a "turned up beak"' is a Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*, not a Red-necked Avocet *Recurvirostra novaehollandiae* and infers that the bird that stands on the lotus lily is the White-browed Crake *Amaurornis cinerea*, without arguing why it would not be the Comb-crested Jacana *Irediparra gallinacea* ('Lotus Bird' or 'Lily-trotter'). Later he writes of spearing the 'great' [= Brown] Skua *Stercorarius antarcticus* along the southern coast. Since skuas are rarely seen over land, this presumably refers to the Pacific Gull *Larus pacificus*, which he does not list.

Bird names are not standardised, mostly lack scientific names and are incomplete or inconsistent ('ringneck parrots' and 'ringnecked parrots'). Species identification is problematic; his equating 'eaglehawk' consistently with Wedge-tailed Eagle is questionable and he is frequently wrong.

Clarke fails to distinguish the naming of birds from their classification. It is a false premise to assume that an understanding of the relatedness of birds will be evident from the names given to them. Falcons, hobbies and merlins; mallard, teal, and scaup; harrier, kite, eagle and buzzard are groups of related birds with unrelated names.