

## Book Reviews

**Threatened Birds of Asia: The BirdLife International Red Data Book.** Collar, N.J., (Editor-in-chief), Andreev, A.V., Chan, S., Crosby, M.J., Subramanya, S. and Tobias, J.A. Maps by Rudyanto and M. J. Crosby. BirdLife International, Cambridge. 3,038 pages, in two volumes, £55.00.

I suppose we knew it was coming but it was still a bit of a surprise to see the size of the *Threatened Birds of Asia – The Birdlife International Red Data Book*. Compared to its precursors *Threatened Birds of Africa and related islands* and *Threatened Birds of the Americas* it is positively massive. Two volumes, over 3,000 pages, 5kg and 2.5 million words about a few thousand individuals of some of the rarest bird species in the world. If Nigel Collar ever needs a job in the USA, where some universities still evaluate one's academic productivity by weight he should walk right in; not that he needs any extra. My shelves were already groaning under volumes of *Birds to Watch* and various other *Threatened Birds of ...* titles.

So it's big – but is it any good? Yes it is very good if you have plenty of time, enjoy detective stories and want the minutest details of the documented fate of some fascinating birds. Each species treatment is a new story. Some are long, some are short. The Philippine Eagle *Pithecophaga jefferyi* account runs to 44 small font pages, but if that is not enough for you there is another section on this species on page 2727! Length depends on the amount of literature to sift through, report on and double check. It is this double-checking that is somewhat embarrassing to earlier authors but gives the book its credibility. Collar *et al.* clinically point out Van Balen's arithmetic errors in estimating Bali Starling *Leucospiza rothschildi* numbers in his own reports. In another case, they point to an error in a book on Javan birds where I had quoted a report of nestlings of Javan Cochoa *Cochoa azurea* for a certain month. They traced my source and found that it recorded only a single nestling not plural. My only excuse is that the source was in Dutch and it nearly killed me to dig out such nuggets in the first place.

Compared to the standard half page entries in the *Threatened Birds of the World*, the species accounts are very detailed. Each is accompanied by a map showing all traced records coded to three date periods plus undated records. The localities of all points are listed and these can be looked up in a glossary to obtain exact longitude and latitude. Separate sections deal with Threat category, Distribution, Population, Ecology, Threats, Measures taken, Measures proposed and Remarks. Some problematic species are accorded a Taxonomy section. Point maps for Indonesian, Philippine and Sri Lankan species have topographic shading, which helps make the distribution patterns more comprehensible. It is a pity this was not done throughout.

Several of the stories told remain unsolved mysteries. Where did White-eyed River Martin *Eurochelidon sirintarae* come from? It has only ever been seen at one

wintering spot in Thailand and now not for many years. How come Rufous-headed Robin *Luscinia ruficeps* has been recorded once wintering in Malaya, when otherwise it has never been seen outside of central China? Where did the Siberian Cranes *Grus leucogeranus* winter before they started appearing at Poyang Lake in 1980?

Sadly most of the stories are tragedies and there are not many accounts of miraculous recovery or timely conservation efforts saving the day. Will the Crested Ibis *Nipponia nippon* satisfy? Having worked in Asia myself since 1968, I was saddened to note that many of the species described are species I have been personally involved with or live in areas I have been trying to get saved for conservation. Have we really been so useless, or did we never stand a chance from the beginning?

Perhaps the most depressing thing about the whole book is that there are as many species listed as near-threatened as are described in the book as threatened. By the time the next edition of this volume is due, most of those species will already be fully threatened and we may be faced by a 6,000 page treatise. This is not merely a depressing prediction, I believe many of the near-threatened species already should be listed as threatened. Take the case of the Philippines. Sixty-nine species are described as threatened and another 60 are listed as near-threatened or data deficient. However, I am looking at maps of remaining forest and vegetation cover that were not available to the BirdLife/Haribon team that assigned the red listing categories to Philippine birds. On the basis of habitat loss alone I would want to add many more of the endemic birds of Philippines to the threatened list. All wetland species are threatened and all lowland forest species are threatened. The only habitats that will still be available to birds in 20 years time will be montane forests on Luzon and Mindanao and secondary scrub. Similarly all lowland forest species of Borneo and Sumatra are threatened with the rest of Asia following not far behind.

By the next review, many species now regarded as not threatened will be moving into threatened and near-threatened categories and herein lies a problem. In the process of production of this review some 7,000 source documents were rigorously and exhaustively consulted and all data relevant to the candidate species extracted. However, only the data for the candidate species, so if we need to collate data for another 200 species for the next edition, someone has to go back again to all those original references!

There are some obscure records that were out of reach of the authors. Many of the technical survey reports and locality management plans of the FAO and WWF programmes in Indonesia between 1976–1986 provide reports on the status of localities and records of species. The useful 1994 Expedition report of University of Bristol to Halmahera is not cited. A box devoted to the merits or non-merits of introducing Bali Starlings included in the IUCN (1986) *Managing Protected Areas in the Tropics* book could have usefully been commented on but was not. But it is the volume of documentation screened rather than such obscure omissions that is most striking.

I feel some further guilt in that I was asked to review and comment on many of the species accounts in this book but did not have time to do this. There must be other birdwatchers in Asia who will now also realize they are sitting on many unpublished sightings that should be given documentation. I sometimes see Phil-

ippine Ducks *Anas luzonica* on the lakes of Southwoods golf course near Manila. I was once shown a photo of a wild Rufous-headed Robin taken in Wolong, Qionglai Mts. in April. I could add many more if I took the time.

I am particularly delighted that the entire book is available on the web at [www.rdb.or.id](http://www.rdb.or.id) and you can download any of the species accounts or general chapters in full as a .pdf file, though be warned this is quite slow – at least from my Philippine office.

The authors are to be congratulated on an immense piece of valuable work. They have done us conservationists an enormous favour in pulling together so much information to the point that we will rarely need to go back to the original sources ourselves. The ball is now back in our court and the authors have clearly highlighted priorities for attending to in each country and many useful recommendations for specific actions needed. Sadly there is absolutely nothing of comparable depth available for other animal taxa.

JOHN MACKINNON,  
*ASEAN Regional Centre for Biodiversity Conservation, Los Banos,  
The Philippines.*

## Referees

### Referees for papers considered for Volume 11 of *Bird Conservation International*

K. Bevanger	Sweden
C. J. Bibby	UK
M. Bosch	Spain
M. de L. Brooke	UK
D. M. Brooks	USA
J. P. Carroll	USA
M. J. Crosby	UK
G. M. Crowley	Aus
J. W. Duckworth	Laos
G. E. Duffield	USA
S. T. Garnett	Aus
P. J. Garson	UK
M. Gochfield	USA
R. D. Hearn	UK
G. J. Holloway	UK
M. J. Jones	UK
B. A. Loiselle	USA
M. Marquiss	UK
P. J. K. McGowan	UK
S. J. Parry	UK
R. F. Porter	UK
K. Renton	Mexico
J. A. Robinson	UK
P. D. Vickery	USA
C. J. Vogel	USA
D. Watling	Fiji
D. C. Wege	UK
T. F. Wright	USA