

Reviews

GROUSE

By Adam Watson and Robert Moss. Collins, New Naturalist 107, London, 2008. 529 pages; 199 colour photos; many diagrams.
ISBN 978-0-00-715097-7.
Hardback, £50.00.
ISBN 978-0-00-715098-4.
Paperback, £30.00.

It was an interesting choice that the founders of *British Birds* made in 1907 when they decided upon the Red Grouse *Lagopus lagopus*, then considered the only bird endemic to Britain, as the emblem of the journal. That was a century ago and now we treat this bird as the British race of the wide-ranging Willow Grouse. But let's not forget that grouse are important. They have had a significant influence on land use in our uplands and they play an important role in the economies of many people in the countryside. They also stimulate passionate debates between conservationists and landowners – in fact, it is hard to think of another bird family of this small size that could warrant a book of this nature. Both authors are renowned experts in their field and have written important contributions on grouse

ecology for this journal over the years including, in 1980, the unforgettable 'Why are Capercaillie cocks so big?' (*Brit. Birds* 73: 440–447).

This is the 107th New Naturalist title to have appeared since the series started in 1945 and it is also one of the largest volumes. It deals exclusively with the four grouse species to be found in Britain & Ireland: Red Grouse (although referred to in the book as Willow Ptarmigan when non-British & Irish populations are discussed), Ptarmigan *L. muta*, Black Grouse *Tetrao tetrix* and Capercaillie *T. urogallus*.

An introductory chapter acquaints us with the family and another discusses nomenclature (and reveals some of the more bizarre names that have been awarded to these species over the years). Chapters on each of the four species contain sections on plumage, behaviour, systematics, distribution, numbers, habitat, diet, metabolism, longevity, survival, breeding, movements, population trends and conservation, and run to 151 pages in total. Nine other chapters focus on some of the important aspects of their lives, including threats from a range of sources. The book is well illus-

trated with 199 well-chosen colour photographs, making it pleasant to browse through, and although thoroughly authoritative it is written in a readable style, in short sections, which make it easy to navigate.

So how are the grouse faring? Although the Ptarmigan is currently surviving well, it is sometimes a victim of ski wires and is bound to be affected by climate change, while future farming policies may bring a (detrimental) reduction in grazing by sheep and deer. However, the other three species are declining. While the artificially maintained population of Red Grouse fluctuates depending on a huge range of factors, Black Grouse and Capercaillie are both red-listed, threatened by elements of habitat change and management, and face future difficulties through changing climate.

This is an excellent book and a real demonstration of the New Naturalist series at its best. Although titles in this long-running series have been appearing more frequently in the last few years, this is the first to focus on a bird family since 1992.

Keith Betton

SOUTHERN ENGLAND

By Peter Friend.
Collins, New Naturalist 108, London, 2008.
416 pages; many colour photos, maps and figures.
ISBN 978-0-00-724742-4.
Hardback, £50.00.
ISBN 978-0-00-724743-1.
Paperback, £30.00.

This volume discusses the geology and landscapes of southern England, which is here defined (very roughly) as England below a line from the Severn Valley to the Wash. Five of the book's nine chapters are devoted to regional discus-

sion (of the southwest, the south coast, the Severn Valley, London and the Thames Valley, and East Anglia), while the other four deal with broader issues. The story is well told, as the text is lucid, the maps mostly good ('mostly' because a few do not please my eye, and on one Salisbury is mislabelled as 'Winchester'), the figures clear and the photos well chosen.

So far so good, but I have to admit to a nagging question: leaving aside slavish collectors of the hardback edition, at who exactly is this volume aimed? The way in which certain terms are italicised and explained on first mention caused my mind to

wander back several decades, to idle hours spent in school geography class; in short, *Southern England* has the air of a (rather superior) school and college textbook, and is, I suppose, none the worse for that. In that role and as a reference work it is admirable, but whether many people (other than conscientious reviewers) will read it in its entirety is questionable. One final point: I cannot fathom why the right-hand margin of the text has not been justified; the resulting appearance does not suit a publication of this nature and is simply a distraction.

Pete Combridge

**BIRDS IN CHESHIRE
AND WIRRAL: A BREEDING
AND WINTERING ATLAS**

By David Norman, on behalf
of Cheshire and Wirral
Ornithological Society.
Liverpool University Press,
Liverpool, 2008. 708 pages;
over 300 colour photographs;
vignettes and line-drawings;
over 500 maps.
ISBN 978-1-84631-152-9.
Hardback, £44.99.

This is the second tetrad atlas of Cheshire, this one including winter distribution as well as breeding range, and the degree of change since the first atlas is fascinating. The surveyors who completed the first atlas in 1984 could hardly have predicted the developments revealed and, importantly, quantified, by this second atlas. Who would have thought, for example, that Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* and Common Raven *Corvus corax*, two species still absent in 1984, would be fighting over the last few suitable nest-sites in the county by 2008?

Something else has changed in the last two decades – our ability to collect, handle and publish data. The first atlas required seven years of fieldwork, the second, just three. It took eight years for the first atlas to be published; this book has appeared just 18 months after the last data were collected. The first book was modest in size and pres-

entation; this volume is in full colour throughout and weighs over 2 kg – it is another book that will have purchasers considering reinforced bookshelves. After a short introduction explaining how the atlas was organised, there are 18 pages devoted to habitats, dominated by annotated colour photos and augmented by maps of habitat distribution. An excellent analysis of the bird data, including tables which clearly show the winners and losers over the last two decades, is followed by an analysis of the possible reasons for change.

The species accounts comprise the bulk of the book. For most species there are two accounts (where appropriate), for breeding and wintering populations, and four maps, illustrating breeding distribution, changes in breeding distribution since the first atlas, winter distribution and differences between summer and winter distribution. The accounts are quite brief and chatty, helping to point out what the maps show, rather than providing detailed analysis. They are accompanied by a mixture of colour photographs (all, I assume, taken in Cheshire & Wirral) and either colour or black-and-white illustrations.

Overall, Cheshire & Wirral seems to have had more winners than losers over the last two decades. Twelve species have been gained as breeders, compared with six lost, although only ten species have a net gain of over 100 tetrads compared with 17 with the same

net loss. The declining birds include most of the expected species, dominated by farmland birds and trans-Saharan migrants. Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* shows the greatest decline (a net loss of 305 tetrads), but the biggest winner is Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*, present in 560 tetrads compared with just 12 a mere 20 years ago!

There are population estimates for the commonest breeding species, which reveal that, while Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* is the most widespread species, House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* is still numerically the commonest. This is despite a previously unnoticed and unexplained retreat from the eastern hills above 350 m, a distributional change shared with Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*. These small-scale changes are particularly revealing. For example, Sky Lark *Alauda arvensis* and Linnet *Carduelis cannabina* still breed in every 10-km square in Cheshire, yet they show net losses of 150 and 161 tetrads respectively, and the maps reveal an increasingly patchy distribution.

This atlas, beautifully produced and presented, is an excellent example of what a local atlas adds to the national picture. By showing bird distributions in finer detail and incorporating comparisons with the earlier survey, the data become even more valuable.

Mike Pennington

**THE WISDOM OF BIRDS:
AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY
OF ORNITHOLOGY**

By Tim Birkhead.
Bloomsbury, London, 2008.
433 pages; many colour
illustrations.
ISBN 978-0-7475-9256-3.
Hardback, £25.00.

At first sight, a book covering the history of ornithology and running to some 400-odd pages may seem a somewhat daunting prospect to

many *BB* readers. Yet this work is entertaining, fascinating, thoroughly researched and beautifully written, just as we might expect from Tim Birkhead. Unlike other recent titles that have also explored the history of ornithology, this work focuses much more on bird behaviour itself and how human knowledge in this area has advanced over the past 400 years, rather than concentrating on the lives of the individuals responsible for those advances.

Birkhead cleverly breaks down

a huge subject into a series of chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of the day-to-day lives of birds. These chapters take us on a fascinating journey, where we investigate conception and the development of the egg, the breeding cycle, instinct and intelligence, migration, territory, bird-song, sex, infidelity and reproduction, and longevity. Each chapter weaves an entertaining route through its particular theme, referring to the earliest relevant remarks or references – these often

dating back to the deeply entrenched ideas of the great Greek philosophers – through the exploration of evidence and testing of ideas, eventually bringing us right up to date with modern thinking and current theories on the subject matter. I wager that even the most well-read ornithologist will find something new, surprising, even inspiring, in every chapter. As early as page 10, I was surprised to learn that in the highly promiscuous Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola* the male can copulate for as long as 30 minutes! This prevents other males from mating with its female at a critical time, and introduces sufficient sperm to swamp those of any previous (or subsequent) males.

Strong superstitions, prejudices and/or deeply held religious beliefs have at times impeded progress in some fields of ornithology for long periods. These, and the tension between reconciling the results of museum studies, experiments and latterly field observations with such entrenched beliefs, are a constant theme throughout the book. Equally entertaining are the arguments of the day – the self righteousness and arrogance of some

authors in the face of quite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Slightly more shocking are the rather extreme experiments undertaken to enhance understanding of, or to disprove, widely held myths. Was it really necessary to hold Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* underwater until they drowned to test whether they could survive there for a winter during the early debates on migration?!

The book is illustrated throughout with contemporary artwork. Some paintings date as far back as the sixteenth century and many plates were first produced for some of the greatest biological works of their time. The detail of Henrik Gronvold's Garden Warblers *Sylvia borin* published in Howard's famous *British Warblers* in 1912 is on a par with anything produced since, but in many cases it is hard to believe that the artists had even seen their subject matter, let alone been familiar with it! Even the production of the book has a contemporary feel about it – look no further than the front cover.

I was fascinated by the book's preface, for which Birkhead, as part of an international team studying Aquatic Warblers, asked his col-

leagues who they considered to have been the most influential ornithologist of all time. As he describes, each member of the team was staunchly patriotic, with the Germans nominating Erwin Stresemann, the Americans Ernst Mayr and the British David Lack. Birkhead's own choice was John Ray, a seventeenth-century biologist and philosopher, and throughout this book Birkhead mounts a very persuasive case that Ray is indeed the equal of his more recent and more widely known counterparts. The book's title, *The Wisdom of Birds*, is a play on the culmination of Ray's lifetime's work *The Wisdom of God*, published in 1691.

This is one of the best and most enjoyable reads that I have had in a long time. I found it hard to put down, just like a good novel; yet this is a factual book and in it there is simply so much to learn. Tim Birkhead has successfully bridged the gap between scientist and birder and I thoroughly recommend this book. It will surely be a contender for the *BB* Best Bird Book of the Year award in 2009!

Paul Harvey

THE BREEDING BIRDS OF CLEVELAND

Edited by Graeme Joynt,
Ted Parker and Vic Fairbrother.
Teessmouth Bird Club, 2008.

428 pages;

114 colour photographs;

135 line-drawings;

127 distribution maps.

ISBN 978-0-905482-01-9.

Hardback, £24.99.

This new breeding bird atlas is a great example of dedicated teamwork from the northeast of England. The Teessmouth Bird Club came into being in 1960 during a period of great change to local environments, particularly within the Tees Estuary. It is not surprising that much early recording effort was concentrated along the

coast, where 'reclamation' of marshes and poor habitat management occurred. With better environmental planning today, and a new RSPB reserve in the offing at Saltholme Pools, it is hoped that the remaining wetlands will survive and improve.

A product of the local government reorganisation in 1974, Cleveland survived until 1996, when it was replaced by the unitary authorities of Redcar & Cleveland, Middlesbrough, Stockton-on-Tees and Hartlepool. However, Cleveland remains a current bird recording area, the external boundaries being the same as those of the former county and covering some 59,000 ha. Between 1999 and 2006, some 50 members of Teessmouth Bird Club carried out the fieldwork which forms the basis of this book.

This Atlas survey differs from

most others in that surveyors covered each tetrad throughout April, May and June, effectively 'adopting' tetrads as their local patch. Coverage was more thorough than the usual timed, fixed route, with considerable time spent gathering evidence of breeding. A total of 127 breeding species was noted during the survey, and this large total reflects the varied habitats found within Cleveland. The vegetation, land-use and physical characteristics section of the book is particularly interesting, helping to set the context for the species accounts. The percentage of habitat type is displayed in a series of tables so that readers can see at a glance which of the four authorities has, for example, the most conifer or semi-natural broad-leaved woodland. Fieldworkers are acknowledged by name, together

with the tetrads they covered, providing a possible conservation benefit – in that, if any threat or opportunity should arise, there is a named source of local expertise who might be consulted.

The individual species accounts follow the format adopted by many county avifaunas and atlas projects. This includes information on national and local trends, together with some excellent references to historical information, the survey results, and comments on the factors that might have affected their accuracy. Each species has a map, with a legend giving the estimated number of breeding pairs, the total number of occupied

tetrads and the percentage of occupied tetrads. The maps are of unusually high quality for the scale/size. Not surprisingly, farmland and woodland birds are declining here, as in other parts of Britain: possibly as few as 319 pairs of Grey Partridges *Perdix perdix* remain; just 23 pairs of Corn Buntings *Emberiza calandra* remain, in 13 tetrads; and the Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* is nearing local extinction. On the plus side, the Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*, Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* and Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*, together with other species, are

apparently increasing.

Although most of the line-drawings are good, about 10% did not properly capture the species, in my view. By contrast, the 114 colour photographs are, without exception, excellent. This book is an absolute must for any birder, conservationist, or local authority environment staffer living in or around Cleveland. It shows what can be achieved by relatively few dedicated birders with a zeal not just for fieldwork, but for seeking sponsorship and achieving professional production standards.

Tim Cleeves

BIRDS IN OUR LIFE

By David Snow.

William Sessions,

The Ebor Press, York, 2008.

233 pages, many photographs, sketches and colour paintings.

ISBN 978-1-85072-381-3.

Paperback, £12.99.

This delightful book comprises a series of autobiographical notes of David Snow's life, from childhood to the present. The latter half of the book is influenced strongly by his late wife Barbara, as much of their studies were shared or made in parallel, hence the 'our' in the title. Birds, of course, form the binding thread, but less so in the first two chapters, which cover David's early life, schooling and Second World War service in the RNVR.

The next couple of chapters follow a progression through his ornithological life as an undergraduate at Oxford, moving seamlessly to the EGI and expeditions to North Africa and Lapland (looking for geographical variation in tits, including an account of his lone journey on a motorbike from England to North Africa and back), migration studies and Blackbirds *Turdus merula*. He was fortunate to be at the EGI when the senior members were W. B. Alexander,

David Lack and Reg Moreau – he makes some interesting comments about all three, and other ornithologists he met over the years.

He then recounts a variety of jobs and appointments which took him to Central and South America, as well as marriage to Barbara, in Trinidad. His various posts included a spell as the third Director of the Charles Darwin Research Station on the Galapagos Islands. The Research Station was relatively new and small then, as was the BTO when he became Director in 1964, and the bird section at the British Museum (Natural History), to where he subsequently moved. All of this makes fascinating reading and includes much about the history of these establishments. David considered himself lucky to get these appointments as it meant that he could still get involved in fieldwork. He further comments that these jobs were offered to him – he did not have to compete for them. Indeed, throughout the book the reader is quickly won over by his modesty.

There were further expeditions to Central and South America by Barbara to study tropical forest birds – bellbirds (Cotingidae) and Oilbirds *Steatornis caripensis* – the latter also studied by David in Trinidad. All of the accounts of the

various expeditions fill in the background to the serious scientific work being carried out and should appeal to the non-specialist reader. Some of the results of the studies are given but for more detail the reader is directed to their published papers and books. Only some are referenced so a bibliography of their main works would have helped and been of interest.

The text is enlivened by many photographs as well as sketches and watercolours by the author; he is an excellent artist. David Snow shows that he and Barbara have been highly talented in all the fields of ornithology that they have embarked upon (including, for David, spells of editing the journals *Ibis* and *Bull. B.O.C.*).

This lively account should appeal to anyone who has the slightest interest in the Snows or, indeed, in the history and development of ornithology in Britain since the 1940s, in which David Snow has played a significant role.

Robin Prytherch

As this issue of *BB* was being put together, we were sad to learn of the death of David Snow, in mid February 2009. An obituary is in preparation and will appear in *BB* shortly. *Eds*

