

## BOOK REVIEWS

**A Pictorial Guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent**, by Salim Ali and S. Dillon Ripley; illustrated by J. H. Dick. Oxford University Press, New Delhi. 177 pages; 106 plates (1983). Rs. 120.

This slim and very reasonably priced volume is the first work to depict all of the 1220 bird species known for the Indian subcontinent, including Sri Lanka. All species, except for some large waterbirds, ducks, shorebirds and birds of prey in flight are portrayed in full colour. Text is necessarily brief, being usefully limited to a description of the habitats and distributional range of each species.

One factor which detracts slightly from the book's many attributes is that the captions and text, though opposite the plates, are not listed in the same order in which the species appear on the plates. This does not suit rapid referral in the field and, indeed, the rather large format of the book (19.5 × 26 cm) make it less suitable for field use than more conventional guides.

John Dick's illustrations have a clear, aesthetically pleasing, diagrammatic quality about them. The standard of accuracy is fairly good and certainly far better than depictions of many species in the Indian Handbook. The artist's keen eye has usually picked out the more subtle structural features. (For example, the proportions of head and bill in the various blue-and-orange flycatchers are shown fairly accurately. Some previous artists have tended to simply map out different colour patterns on to a standardized bird shape.) The artist has shown himself familiar to some degree with recently discovered field characters. He has given a fairly accurate rendition of the subtly-marked *Anthus hodgsoni*, but has failed to convey accurately the plumage characters of *Anthus roseatus*. Dick has made a very creditable attempt at depicting the (supposedly difficult) warblers, but has not been altogether successful. Many of his *Phylloscopus*, *Cettia* and *Bradypterus* would be impossible to identify using this book alone. *Graminicola bengalensis* is shown with an unaccountably needle-like bill, when in fact it has quite a heavy bill.

Unaccountably, a few species have been omitted. We may not miss *Cuculus saturatus* or *Anthus godlewski* too much, as both are arguably inseparable on plumage features from their close relatives. However, *Phylloscopus nitidus* is an unfortunate omission, while *P. maculipennis*, though illustrated, lacks a caption and text.

These criticisms notwithstanding, it must be emphasised that this is a tremendously useful book which, for field identification of the largest number of Indian birds, has no serious rivals at present. It contains the best existing illustrations of a great many species which also occur in Thailand and no Thai birdwatcher should be without a copy. The authors and the Bombay Natural History Society are to be congratulated in making Dick's illustrations available in such a useful format and at a price which is within reach of most pockets.

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