

R E V I E W S

A Guide to the Birds of Thailand, by Boonsong Lekagul and Philip D. Round, illustrated by Mongkol Wongkalasin and Kamol Komolphalin. Saha Karn Bhaet, Bangkok, pp 457. Price 800 Baht or US\$ 32.00.

Experience shows that good SE Asian bird books are long in gestation but hard to hide, and most birders of the region have long decided, sight-unseen, that this one will be possessed by whatever means. The credentials of its author-artist team are too well known to need more than a word of introduction in a Thai journal. Activist Dr. Boonsong Lekagul, over a near-legendary lifetime crusade for wildlife conservation and wise land use in his country, has written, illustrated, sponsored and/or nurtured many national wildlife guides among which, now, three deal with birds. Philip Round, designer and author of the text, indisputably knows more about Thai field ornithology than any one person ever has; Mongkol Wongkalasin, responsible for the bulk of the plates, has painted for previous Boonsong publishing projects; and Kamol Komolphalin, who now devotes himself fulltime to conservation education through the medium of his art, is president of the prestigious Bangkok Bird Club and commensurately knowledgeable in the field.

Birds of Thailand has forebears in the two editions of *Bird Guide of Thailand* (B. Lekagul, 1968; Lekagul & Cronin, 1974) but is in no way just a third edition. Apart from the idea of the inside board design and Boonsong Lekagul's own 1968 backcover painting of White-eyed river martins, from first to last this is a new book, produced to a now fully international standard and a fitting salute to the growth of ornithological expertise among Thai nationals. Format is 'field-guide' but with the bonus of extended pre- and post-liminaries, some of which may have been inspired by lay-out in the current British Ornithologists Union *Check-list* series. A Foreword by Ben King, senior author of the Evergreen Collins field-guide to continental SE Asia (for which *Birds of Thailand* could supply first serious competition, though few will resist owning both) is followed by comprehensive acknowledgements (no escape clause for errors of omission!); a pocket history of Thailand's three ages of ornithology, familiar also in neighbouring countries and determined by much the same forces (one, strangely, the Pentagon); physiography including summaries of climate and bird habitats by substrate and vegetation type (not excluding the human landscape); zoogeography; conservation issues; finding birds, with advice on useful projects and how to collect and contribute information; lists of relevant organizations in Thailand, key birdwatching sites (cross-referenced to a map showing natural boundaries and surviving forest cover), national parks and sanctuaries; and a 'how to use this book' section that explains categories, reins in on sloppy use of status terms and is sufficiently with-it to include a decision on what to do about Sibley *et als'* DNA-DNA hybridization taxonomy. Appendices cover a glossary of terms, stop-press additions to the national list, likely future finds and indices to English, scientific and Thai bird names. All fits into less than one-fifth of the book's length thanks to Round's skill at packing facts into economical yet smooth prose. No subject gaps are obvious, but having gone to this much trouble a short background to the plates would have been a happy extra.

The body of the book treats the complete current Thai list in 'new generation' field-guide style, i.e., with brief family introduction and densely factual species text ranged

as far as possible opposite, and never more than one or two pages away from, relevant illustrations. To have achieved this over 360 pages and 915 species, and fit a distribution map big enough to be realistic against each text (avoiding the cop-out of stuffing them all into an appendix), without upsetting impact, is an impressive feat of design-work. Texts per species (over 60 more than in *Boonsong & Cronin*) run from 4 – 5 lines to a half page, according to the extent of problems, but never spill over the end of a page. They cover: visual field characters; sexual, age and seasonal plumage differences; voices; and habitat and status. The maps offer an ambitious five categories of information in sufficiently real detail that the smallest fragments of range have to be searched for. They reveal much, including such things as the latitudinal limits of migratoriness that make exciting sense out of passage schedules that ringers and others south of Thailand have long found bizarre or otherwise misinterpreted.

The 135 plates form by far the most ambitious bird-art project yet attempted for the region. They use R.T. Peterson indicators and show all birds in colour, in multiple plumages and flight where appropriate. Many rival the best illustrations of the species concerned available and all are more comprehensively researched in the field than any before them. Having been privileged to look over original artwork, I am impressed by standards of reproduction and printing achieved, though a few plates have come out darker than anyone could have intended. Shrikes and woodswallow (125) and broadbills and pittas (76 and to a lesser extent 77) are examples, with unfortunate effects on greens.

It is usual that reviewers shall at this point stoop to picking holes in the ornithological facts presented. Given that study of bird identification in this part of the world is still dynamic, that would no doubt be possible. I hold back partly for genuine want of having found anything immediate to pounce on and partly in respect of the awesome amount of good fieldwork that has gone into making this book; most, however, because this is the job of users in the field communicating directly with the authors in readiness for an eventual second edition.

It remains only to record that *Birds of Thailand* is crisply and accurately printed on quality art paper, solidly bound in hard covers and altogether of a standard guides mooted for other SE Asian countries will emulate with difficulty. As stated, an instant market exists among the region's cognoscenti but this book has sales potential around the birding world. Remembering that both editions of *Bird Guide of Thailand* went out of print well before the end of their useful lifespans and observing the lengths buyers from even as nearby as Kuala Lumpur are going to secure copies of the new book, one hopes the sponsors and publishers have a real idea of the print-run they could actually shift through a proper distribution network overseas. Such sales could surely serve both the Bangkok Bird Club and nature education well by underwriting the cost of a Thai language edition.

D.R. Wells

Zoology Department

University of Malaya

59100 Kuala Lumpur Malaysia