

A Field Guide to the Birds of South-East Asia by Craig Robson. 2000. New Holland Publishers (UK) Ltd., London. Hardback, 504 pp.

In terms of field guides Ben King's 1975 publication of *The Birds of South-East Asia* (KING ET AL., 1975) was a huge leap forward (although numerous black-and-white plates were a serious flaw), and it stimulated adventurous birders from many countries to head for Thailand and Malaysia. Then in 1991 Philip Round's *A Guide to the Birds of Thailand* (Lekagul & Round, 1991) raised the standards of identification-oriented texts to a significantly higher level and included very good colour illustrations and distribution maps for all species.

With Vietnam and Laos opening up to tourists around the start of the nineties, and some parts of Burma and Cambodia becoming accessible too, professional survey teams and travelling birders have been venturing more and more into these countries. Much information on the distribution and biology of hitherto little known species has been discovered and a number of new species and subspecies have been described. This sturdy, well-produced and attractive new field guide by Craig Robson includes much of these data and will be of great benefit on all future birding trips in Southeast Asia, where only within Thailand will it not be an absolutely essential item in one's day-pack.

So what of its format, content and quality? A concise 23 pages of standard preliminary sections are followed by 104 colour plates with facing-page texts of basic identification features, and 254 pages of very detailed species texts. The preliminary section covers acknowledgements, the order of species, taxonomy and nomenclature, glossary, avian topography, natural habitats of the region, national bird and conservation organisations, and references. The order of species generally follows An Annotated Checklist of the Birds of the Oriental Region (Inskipp et al., 1996). However, Robson has drawn on his own studies and those of other researchers throughout the region to include many recent species splits and recently described subspecies, and several proposed splits. The mythical Deignan's Babbler *Stachyris rodolpheii* bites the dust, being considered an invalid taxon indistinguishable from some specimens of Rufous-fronted Babbler *S. rufifrons*. All the variations from Inskipp's list are detailed and many have particular relevance to birders in Thailand.

The 104 colour plates, in a block after the introduction, are by 14 artists, with Richard Allen (27) and Tim Worfolk (28) contributing most and the other 12 artists providing 2–8 each. All but 11 of the region's 1,251 species are depicted, some by just one illustration, many by 2–5, a few by 6–7, Oriental Honey-buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus* and Blue-throated Flycatcher *Cyornis rubeculoides* by eight, Great Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga* by 10 and White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* by no less than 16. Most age-related plumages and morphologically distinct subspecies are illustrated. The majority of plates are very good and many are really excellent: some of my favourites are partridges and pheasants, cranes and rails, snipes, vultures, *Aquila* eagles, harriers and falcons, pittas, leaf-warblers, laughingthrushes, pipits, finches and grosbeaks. Regrettably, a few are well below par, most notably fish-eagles, other small eagles, Oriental Honey-buzzard and all other buzzards (proportions and jizz wrong, and colours too garish); magpies and crows (dull and scruffy); the prinias and tailorbirds (rather washed out and flat) and the bush-warblers (much too pale and fuzzy).

The facing-page texts provide succinct notes of the main plumage and structural identification features. The full species texts are very detailed and helpful—the result of the author’s field skills, acuity and expertise developed over 20 years of birding trips to southeast Asia. In addition to descriptions of plumage, structure and behaviour are altitude ranges, habitat preferences, World and SE Asia ranges, breeding season, nest and egg details, and, of course, vocalisations. This voice section is extremely detailed and pretty comprehensive, though I noticed that the rasping “fishing reel” calls given by the Short-tailed Parrotbill *Paradoxornis davidianus* which I observed at Thung Salaeng National Park are not included. In some ways, though, this section is almost too detailed, relying on the readers’ abilities to interpret phonetic phrases. For one of the newly-split species, the Indochinese Bushlark *Mirafra marionae*, there are no less than seven lines of voice description and phonetic phraseology!

The most obvious shortcoming of this superb field guide is the lack of distribution maps which, admittedly, must be very complicated and time-consuming to produce. Nearly all other recently published regional field guides have included distribution maps of one kind or another, and written ranges such as (for Pin-tailed Green Pigeon *Treron apicauda*) Myanmar, north Tenasserim, W, NW, NE Thailand, east Cambodia, Laos, W, E Tonkin, N, C, S (north) Annam are not an adequate substitute. Production constraints and cost considerations have resulted in some of the colour plates being rather cluttered (no less than 45 images on the plate of jaegers (skuas) and large gulls and a very small font size and narrow page margins make the main species texts quite difficult to read.

The author is to be congratulated on producing such an excellent and much needed modern field guide which will surely prove to be hugely popular.

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