Birds of Somalia

By J. S. Ash & J. E. Miskell.
Colour plates by Martin Woodcock.
336 pages; 5 colour plates; 24 black-and-white plates; 654 distribution maps.

The ornithology of Somalia has been the least well-known of any African country. This long-awaited book admirably helps to correct this. It is essentially an atlas of the known distribution of all species recorded in Somalia. Of seven introductory chapters, I found that by Christopher Hemmings on the vegetation and soils particularly useful, whilst the final one on bird and wildlife conservation by Peter Robertson makes depressing reading with its catalogue of destruction of wooded habitats and drainage of wetlands, and its conclusion that ‘for ornithologists of the future, the prospects are bleak in Somalia.’

There are some 20 rather small black-and-white photographs of a range of habitats, two clear colour maps showing the topography and broad vegetation zones, and five beautiful colour plates by Martin Woodcock, depicting 25 of Somalia’s specialities, including seven endemic species, the endemic subspecies and other poorly known species, several of which were first described by the authors.

Distribution maps are given for all 654 species so far recorded in Somalia, and for each there is a concise, clear and readable account, outlining its distribution, status, habitat preferences and behaviour, and summarising breeding data. The maps show distribution by half-degree map squares, of which there are 259 within Somalia. There are data for over 200 of these squares, the authors having personally visited 62% of all squares. In their first three years in the country, John Ash and John Miskell added some 50 species of birds to the Somalian List.

The book has a somewhat cramped layout, with three maps and accompanying texts, in small print, to each page. Grey shading, showing altitude, does not add to the attractiveness of the maps, and it would have been useful to have had an inset map for each species showing its African range. The content of this book will, however, be warmly welcomed by all birdwatchers and ornithologists with an interest in the Horn of Africa or in the continent as a whole: a huge gap has been filled, and the book should stimulate and help direct further fieldwork, the political situation allowing. We can now look forward to another and equally expert treatise by the senior author on The Birds of Ethiopia, which has already had an even longer incubation than did The Birds of Somalia.

Stephanie J. Tyler
opposite the plates. Fourteen artists contributed to the book, all but one British, and represent the very best of present-day bird illustrators. What a shame that these wonderful artists have been so badly served by the designers and editors of this unremarkable book. Although most of the illustrations are good, the styles do not always match well and the occasional mixing of different artists on the same plate is a big mistake (the warblers are particularly bad). This has led to some serious scale problems (for example, the Coal Tit _Parus ater_ is larger than the Great Tit _P. major_). In addition, the colour reproduction is generally very poor, and many plates are washed-out and not sharp. Although some pages are quite good, this disappointing book is definitely worth avoiding.

NIGEL REDMAN

**The Warblers of Britain & Europe**

Filmed by Paul Doherty.
Narrated by Bill Oddie.
Video. Running time 2 hrs 28 mins. £16.95.
If warblers are your ‘thing’ (and they are certainly mine), you will not be able to resist this latest offering from Bird Images. After a brief introduction, 56 species are shown (including the recent ‘splits’ involving Hume’s Warbler *Phylloscopus humei*, Eastern Bonelli’s Warbler *P. orientalis*, Iberian Chiffchaff *P. brehmi* and Canary Islands Chiffchaff *P. canariensis*). When there are clear differences between them, races (including several possible future ‘splits’) are also included. In addition, Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* and Firecrest *R. ignicapillus* are included (but, strangely in view of the inclusion of Canary Islands Chiffchaff, there is no mention of Tenerife Kinglet *R. teneriffae*). Quality of the images varies from superb to adequate, but excellent use is made of freeze-frame and repetition of key sequences to show specific identification points. In a few cases, still photographs are used to augment the film sequences or as a substitute when, presumably, video sequences are not available.

The commentary by Bill Oddie is serious and businesslike, concentrating on identification features rather than every minute detail of the plumage, and covering relevant behaviour, call and song. The identification features covered assume a reasonable level of expertise, and the beginner might find it better to refer to the text of fieldguides for some of the commoner species, for the script comes into its own by bringing in some of the less-well-known pointers, and by making comparisons between similar species. For instance, it draws attention to the downward tail-pumping of Olivaceous Warbler *Hippolais (Acrocephalus?) pallida*, the downward tail-wagging movements of Common Chiffchaff *P. collybita*, and the closed-bill singing of Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* compared with the open-bill singing of Marsh Warbler *A. palustris*. There are useful tips, such as the comment that Willow Warbler *P. trochilus* has everything longer than the Common Chiffchaff: song, call, primaries and bill (an aide-memoir which will never now be forgotten).

There is good coverage of races, as already mentioned, and of sexual differences when these are major, but not of all age differences (a worn summer adult can look like a totally different species from a fresh-plumaged autumn first-winter, but this is not always emphasised). In many cases, attention is drawn to distinctive phrases, rhythms or timing of songs and calls, but there must surely be more to be said about the song of Rüppell’s Warbler than merely ‘The song is not particularly impressive.’

If this video is revised, it would be useful to have juvenile Goldcrest included (it is referred to, but not shown, even as a still), and the appearance of juvenile Firecrest is not mentioned. These omissions are, however, mere quibbles. Anyone with an interest in warbler identification should certainly acquire this video, which is full of useful images, comparisons and tips. The value is enhanced by the inclusion of country and month with every sequence. As well as a reference tool, however, this is great entertainment for anyone who likes ‘little brown jobs’.

J. T. R. SHARROCK

---

**Species History in Scotland: introductions and extinctions since the Ice Age**


This book describes the effects of human activities on Scottish wildlife through history, and is derived from contributions to the 1996 Institute for Environmental History annual conference. There is much to interest the birdwatcher, ranging from a depressing account of the extinction of the Great Auk *Pinguinus impennis* (and how
changes in human attitudes came just too late to save it) to the more positive re-establishments of White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* and Red Kite *Milvus milvus*. It is both thought-provoking and intensely relevant at a time when, through global climate change and agricultural intensification, human impacts on wildlife are probably greater than ever.

IAN CARTER

**Coloured Key to the Wildfowl of the World**


Revised edition of this familiar guide, with colour paintings by the late Sir Peter Scott, of which the 1988 edition was reviewed by Keith Vinicombe (*Brit. Birds* 82: 86).
Each bird's approximate distribution is depicted in a map of Somalia. In the fashion of a breeding atlas, a solid or an open dot marks a site record of the bird as documented by the authors or by other researchers, respectively. The first 78 pages of the book contain a great and in-depth overview of the country's vegetation, followed with history, geology, and climate of Somalia. A good introduction is also given for the migration and breeding of the birds. This book is a reference to status and distribution.