

BOOK REVIEW

The birds of Papua New Guinea including the Bismarck Archipelago and Bougainville. Volume 1; by Brian J. Coates, 1985. Adelaide: Dove Publications. Pp 464. ISSN 0 9590257. Price in P.N.G. K70.00.

This magnificently illustrated book treats the birds of political Papua New Guinea, the first to do so. Volume 1 takes us through the non-passerines, dealing with 377 species of the 740 which will be covered by both volumes. Volume 2 will also include summaries of the birds of Irian Jaya and the Solomons.

The opening chapters introduce the characteristics of the bird fauna of the Papuan subregion and its origins; the physical features, climate, and vegetation of Papua New Guinea; a listing of habitats with their representative bird species; and some miscellaneous notes of features of the avifauna. In the systematic section for each species there is a description, a summary of its distribution, notes on habitats, altitudinal range, ecology and breeding, and a listing of recorded subspecies. For nearly all species there is a map showing the probable distribution (shaded), with particular sightings or specimens shown by spots. Finally there are indices and a good bibliography. The whole is sumptuously illustrated with almost 500 colour photographs and a further 44 line drawings. There are maps on the front and back covers, showing places mentioned in the text. Topography of Papua New Guinea and the Port Moresby region.

I found the opening chapters useful, though the vegetation section is a direct summary from Pajamans (1967). The species reports vary from short accounts to long discussions several pages in length. The depth of coverage varies with the extent of the author's experience with that species. The notes are uniformly well written and interesting. Of particular value are the distribution maps, not previously available in any book about PNG birds. Occasionally there are errors, for example the maps for the Slate-breasted Rail and that for the Bare-eyed Rail appear to be reversed.

A long standing irritation for non-professional birders is the lack of standardisation of English names. It seems a shame that the author has in some cases used names which will be different from those used in the forthcoming field guide (Beehler *et. al.* 1986) which, it is to be hoped, will set the standard.

It is for the photographs that this book is most to be valued. The coverage varies, Port Moresby birds being generally better represented. Some species are given wide spreads, such as the Thick-billed Group Pigeon with nine pictures on pages 42, and 295-300. But one can see that the author would have found difficulty in leaving out any of his best shots. Some species photographs are disappointing, for example the

pictures of Brown and Black-billed ('Bar-tailed') Cuckoo-Doves on page 264 are not very useful in assisting identification. In all 232 species, about 60%, are photographed, and it would be unreasonable to expect the author to delay publication while waiting for wider coverage. The bulk of the pictures are of excellent quality and are beautifully reproduced. However, I found the method of labelling the plates extremely irritating. The small reference numbers at the corners of pages mean that the eye has to travel to three different places and back to verify the caption and the picture.

The book is a little difficult to categorize. It remains a very personal account, relying heavily on the author's own experience. It is emphatically not a field guide. Few would be capable of carrying it out of doors, let alone rich enough to risk exposing it to the weather. I think that it succeeds in two ways, firstly as a 'coffee table' book for browsing through a beautiful record of Papua New Guinea's unique avifauna, and secondly as a comprehensive reference book for the region. It will certainly be a welcome addition to any ornithologist's library and I look forward avidly to Volume two.

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Beehler, B.M. *et. al.* 1986. **Birds of New Guinea**. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Pajamans, K. (Ed.). 1967. **New Guinea Vegetation**. Canberra: Australian National University Press.