

Book Review

Owls of the World by Claus König and Friedhelm Weick
Second Edition, 2009, Helm, London.

The book follows the well-established pattern for such family monographs, with a useful checklist at the start, then an introduction followed by succinct introductory chapters on morphology and anatomy, topography, food, hunting, behaviour, breeding, vocalizations, systematics and taxonomy, how to study owls, conservation and molecular phylogeny and systematics of the Strigiformes. Then follows 72 attractive, albeit pale, colour plates, many extensively revised from the original edition, before the systematic section, which includes useful range maps. The species accounts vary in length from about half a page for poorly known species to several pages for well-studied ones.

This is a substantial revision of the original from 2002, now recognizing at least 250 species, using the Biological Species Concept (BSC) according to the authors. They state that specific status can be substantiated by DNA evidence and field studies, with nucleotide substitution in DNA-sequencing variable at subspecific level from zero to 1%. Greater differences suggest species status, a moot point as varying numerical values have been apportioned to such distinctions, some authors adopting far greater or lesser figures to denote species status. Our own recently demoted Lesser Sooty Owl (*Tyto (tenebricosa) multipunctata*) is a case in point, but in this book it is still accorded species status, despite Christidis and Boles (2008) making a case for lumping despite quite significant DNA differences. It all depends where you choose to draw the line, and genetics is not after all going to give us the absolute magical numerical threshold for species status that it once seemed to promise, it comes down to a matter of interpretation still.

For the Australasian region there are many significant changes, with lots of surprises in store. The long over-lumped Barn Owl complex is now broken up, a major innovation here being something called the Boang Barn Owl (*Tyto crassirostris*) from the tiny island of Boang in the Tanna group, off New Ireland. This was collected on the Whitney South Seas Expedition in 1935 and is I suspect unknown in life. The authors split it on the grounds of isolated distribution and great differences in the size of the beak and

talons, but acknowledge that almost everything remains to be learned about this taxon. This is intriguing, indeed bold, and perhaps a tad inconsistent as there are quite a few other isolated taxa which do not get elevated. I respect the courage to break out of the stultifying taxonomic straightjacket, but still find myself wishing for more information, and wonder if a less bold initial move might have been prudent.

They likewise split the three taxa of Boobook in Australia, plus the Morepork (*Ninox novaeseelandiae*) in New Zealand which both vocally and on plumage grounds is very distinct, though some geneticists still insist on lumping them all. The Red Boobook (*Ninox lurida*) of the northern rainforests sure sounds like Southern Boobook (*N. boobook*), whilst the Tasmanian (*N. leucopsis*) does sound a bit different and seems to have genetics that could be argued either way. I was dismayed to discover the use of the misleading and confusing Americanism “Hawk Owl” for the boobooks of the Melanesian islands, when perfectly good well-established names already exist i.e. boobook. I was also dismayed to find the Bismarck Boobook (*N. variegata*) still shown as being found on New Britain, when it is a New Ireland endemic and could be called New Ireland Boobook!

Space precludes further analysis, but there are many quite radical splits in store, and it is stimulating to read through and imagine the furore which is sure to follow. The scientific names of the local Australian Barn Owl is here given as *Tyto delicatula*, contra Christidis and Boles who label it as Pacific Barn Owl *T. javanica*, and the taxonomists will have a field day over the correct affinity-suffice to say it looks as if C & B win out!

I can recommend the book for anyone interested in this amazing family. The long-term specific composition will be likely be a matter of conflicting debate and interpretation for many years yet, and the book is a stimulating and controversial reworking of the systematics.

Phil Gregory, *Muruk* editor