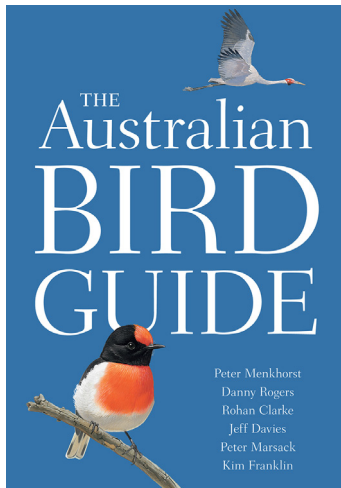


## Book Review

### The Australian Bird Guide

by Peter Menkhorst, Danny Rogers, Rohan Clarke, Jeff Davies, Peter Marsack and Kim Franklin

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Up to 1970, Australian birdwatchers had to make do with Leach's *An Australian Bird Book*, which had antecedents back as far as 1908, and Cayley's *What Bird Is That?*, first published in 1931; neither stacks up well against the present abundance of quality and choice. Leach, pocket-sized, illustrated only less than half of the species covered, while Cayley illustrated the lot but at the cost of a convenient size

for field use. Interestingly, Cayley organised the species according to primary habitats rather than relatedness, an arrangement that is used, in a much-improved form, by *The Australian Bird Guide*.

Things began to change with the publication of the two volumes of Peter Slater's *Field Guide to Australian Birds* in 1970 and 1974 (covering non-passerines and passerines, respectively) and Graham Pizzey's *A Field Guide to the Birds of Australia* in 1980. Both were compromised by having the illustrations bunched together and separated from the written species accounts, and in the latter the distribution maps were also separate. Pizzey's guide was also overloaded with information that was irrelevant for field identification.

These pitfalls were avoided in the next field guide to emerge, *The Birds of Australia: A Book of Identification* authored by Ken Simpson and illustrated by Nicolas Day. Published in 1984, this guide brought together the written account, distribution map and illustrations for each species on two facing pages. 'Simpson and Day' also boasted a helpful 10-page pictorial key to families, titled 'The Handbook', which gave an overview of the habitats and biogeography of birds, plus information on the biology of each family. So popular was this one that a further seven editions were published up to 2010 after rebranding as the *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia*.

In 1986, Peter Slater was back, this time with his wife and son, to produce the *Slater Guide to Australian Birds*, a lightweight and genuinely pocket-sized effort that scuttled unnecessary family information but included an account and illustrations of the nests and eggs of each species. A decade later, in 1997, Pizzey also returned, with Frank Knight as artist, with *The Graham Pizzey and Frank Knight Field Guide to the Birds of Australia* which was larger and

heavier than the others but which had larger illustrations, larger distribution maps and included descriptions of nests, eggs and breeding seasons, details which are not found in field guides elsewhere in the world.

The next 'most comprehensive yet' field guide took information on breeding habits to a new level with a large section devoted to descriptions and 1000 illustrations of the nests and eggs of almost all species breeding in Australia: the self-illustrated *Michael Morcombe Field Guide to Australian Birds*, published in 2000, was the largest guide yet in size but no heavier than 'Pizzey and Knight'. New features included colour-coded tags on the edge of each page that referred to different bird groups, indexed at the front of the book, and a 10-page 'mini' guide to the birds of Australia's offshore territories at the rear. However, the plates seemed crowded, with copious notes and pointers highlighting diagnostic characteristics of each species.

*The Australian Bird Guide* is next in this evolutionary line and most resembles its immediate predecessor, although the format follows that of the *Collins Bird Guide*, published almost 20 years ago. The illustrations are the best and most life-like (virtually photographic realism) of any general Australian bird field guide and show some juvenile and immature and other plumages not previously illustrated in a general field guide. All images are labelled with the sex, subspecies and/or age of the bird, and accompanied by brief notes on salient identification features, often indicated by a pointer. The facing page is composed of text in two columns, and maps along the bottom. The text for each species contains a surprising amount of detail on habitats, voice and behaviour, as well as a description that in many cases repeats the information conveyed in the illustrations, though is useful in the case of confusing species. The maps are about the same size as those in the more recent guides, though in the case of species with restricted distributions (e.g. those endemic to Tasmania or the south-west) larger-scale maps are used, allowing greater detail. As in Morecombe's guide, shading is used to distinguish regions where the species is common from those where its occurrence is irregular, and for species with two or more subspecies, their geographic ranges are shown in different colours, though you might need a magnifying glass to read the subspecies' names. Based on analysis of around 16 million distributional records, these maps are undoubtedly the most scientifically accurate published in any Australian field guide to date. The book covers fully 936 species, up from 778 in Pizzey and Knight and 850 in Morcombe, and includes the expansive treatment of vagrant species recorded *very* infrequently and far from mainland Australia and even of some species that *might* one day turn up on the remotest of the Territories—'potential vagrants' that are

yet to be added to the Australian list. This is information that is likely to be of no interest to most birdwatchers almost all of the time.

The most significant departure of this guide from its predecessors echoes Cayley with the grouping of species into three broad environments (biomes)—marine, freshwater and terrestrial—rather than following a sequence based on the relatedness of species on the evolutionary tree, as do most field guides. Perhaps inspired by the Morcombe guide, the three sections are identified by small colour tabs in the upper corner of each page. The first two lines of each species account contain two new elements. The first is a small circle that indicates the likelihood of encountering the species by the degree to which it is solidly filled, a useful gauge of the ease or difficulty of finding it. The other is a suite of body measurements to give an indication of the bird's size, and here the authors have chosen to present the range of wing lengths, bill lengths and body weights, an unconventional approach justified by arguing that body length measurements are usually taken on dead specimens preserved in unnatural positions, and are of questionable accuracy. It is doubtful that knowing the wing length and weight of a bird will comfort beginners trying to get a feel for its overall size.

Outside the species accounts, useful features of *The Australian Bird Guide* include a 'guide for birders to the evolution and classification of Australian birds' written by Leo Joseph, an expert in the field, a quick visual key to bird groups inside the front cover, a quick alphabetical guide to bird groups near the front, comprehensive explanatory notes beginning on p. 1, a checklist in taxonomic order at the rear of the book, and a map of the Australian Territories covered inside the back cover. There is a section on when and how to go birding, incorporating a list of dos and don'ts, and an informative seven-page essay on bird plumages and moult. Although the latter goes beyond what might be expected in a field guide, it is written in easily digestible style that might encourage birders to take more notice of the state of a bird's plumage.

A few quibbles (not an exhaustive list): the Brown Quail image 'Ad ♀ s Aus' on p. 217 actually shows a male; *contra* p. 222, it has been known for several years that the Square-tailed Kite and Black-breasted Buzzard are perine kites (honey-buzzards etc.), and the Red Goshawk belongs with the *Accipiter/Circus* complex; *cf* p. 230, the Spotted Harrier moult to second immature occurs at the end of the second year, not at the end of the first, when moult to first immature occurs; on p. 241, the Peregrine Falcon subspecies *japonensis* (which is correct in the text) image is mislabelled *japonicus*; the Brush Bronzewing has two

(not three) bands of iridescence in its wings (p. 290); on p. 438, the reference to the 'table on p. 410' should read p. 440; and the Barking Owl subspecies '*peninsulae*' in text p. 248 and image label p. 249 should be *peninsularis*.

The index of species names, surely the most used of the three 'indices' [sic] provided, is ordered by the whole species name so that Black Swan, for example, is listed under 'B' but not under 'S'. The quick alphabetical guide to bird groups on p. vi only partly compensates for this inconvenience. This is not the first CSIRO Publishing title to use this method which is at least unconventional and, at a time when there are several 'standard' lists competing for attention, each with its own conventions for constructing English names, can be difficult and at times irritating to use. In our opinion, CSIRO Publishing is doing the world a disservice by promoting (by example) this indexing technique.

*The Australian Bird Guide* is probably too heavy at 1.5 kilograms and too bulky to be carried into the field but is nevertheless a useful addition to the genre in Australia. It is the most comprehensive and accurate field guide published in Australia to date, even if it does not advance things very much. At \$50, or less if you shop around, it should find a place in most birdwatchers' armoury but will probably be left in the car. It might be that this is a last gasp of the hard-copy field guide when we already have online guides usable on hand-held devices. These give us the best of all worlds and space ceases to be a limiting factor: we can have all those rarities that are cluttering up this book and nesting information as well. Also, the apps can provide at the press of a button in-the-field access to recordings of calls, those indispensable aids to bird identification. Field guide apps already exist for some of this book's predecessors and presumably the online version of this one is being worked on as we speak.

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