

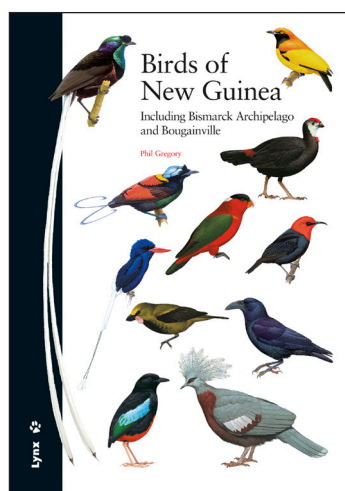
Book Review

Birds of New Guinea: Including Bismarck Archipelago and Bougainville

by Phil Gregory

Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain, 2017.

Hardcover, 464 pp., 1780 illustrations in 211 plates. RRP AU\$110.



When I first arrived in Papua New Guinea in January 1977, there was not a field guide to the spectacular birds of this region. The only aid to identification then was Rand & Gilliard's (1967) *Handbook of New Guinea Birds*. This provided museum descriptions of nearly all species along with identification keys and 48 black-and-white and five colour plates. Somehow

I muddled through and in the process learned much, not least because I was forced to take copious field notes and learn, very quickly, the vocalisations. Thus in 1986 a dream came true with the publication of the first field guide to the birds of New Guinea (Beehler *et al.* 1986). This was timely as interest in the birds of New Guinea was growing rapidly not least as a result of the burgeoning number of birders beginning to explore the country, often on bird tours such as I began leading in 1977. During the ensuing 30 years, this field guide was it! Despite its shortcomings, it was an essential piece of any birder or ornithologist's armoury in New Guinea. In 2015, this field guide was substantially revised, to such a degree that one might regard the new edition as a completely new book. Sensibly, given the times and state of the taxonomy of New Guinea's birds, decisions regarding nomenclatural and taxonomic issues were cogently dealt with by the same two authors in a thorough annotated checklist (an update to the venerable Mayr 1941 publication). Furthermore, in 2011, Guy Dutson published his groundbreaking *Birds of Melanesia*, which thoroughly covered the Bismarck Archipelago, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia (Dutson 2011). To my mind that was it! We finally had really good field guides to birds of New Guinea and the Bismarck Archipelago. However, the publication of Phil Gregory's *Birds of New Guinea: Including Bismarck Archipelago and Bougainville* suggests that is not the case or is it?

Gregory claims (p. 11) that Pratt & Beehler (2015) is "somewhat unwieldy for field use" and implies that his "succinct as possible" production is more user friendly and easier to carry in the field. Pratt & Beehler (2015) weighs 1.41 kg whereas Gregory weighs 1.12 kg. Both are hefty tomes to carry around in the steamy tropics especially when added to bins, 'scope and tripod, camera, tape-recorder, microphone, bottle of water and a daypack with

other essentials. I would leave both either in the car or in camp and take notes as either one is too heavy to carry.

Gregory's is a useful publication but in my opinion not as good as Pratt & Beehler (2015) or Dutson (2011), although it depicts several taxa not previously illustrated. Clearly a great deal of work has gone into this work but to my mind the project was just too much for one person to be as thorough as this reviewer would like. This book of 464 pages includes 202 colour plates of illustrations (100 plates with non-passerines and 102 with passerines) plus a useful nine plates of vagrants and potential vagrants. Tiny maps accompany most of the 943 bird species texts, including the 456 endemics, but not the vagrants and potential vagrants. According to Gregory, there are two species yet to be formally described. This total represents ~9% of global bird diversity with the rich array of endemics representing an impressive 5% of that diversity. I am astonished that the Caspian Tern is regarded as a vagrant as, although scarce, it occurs fairly regularly along the south coast and occasionally elsewhere around New Guinea. On the other hand, the inclusion of several vagrant shorebirds is based on insufficient data and should, as I have previously suggested (see Bishop 2006), be placed in square brackets.

The plates are a mixed bag as one might expect when derived from 25 artists. Sadly, unlike Eaton *et al.*'s (2016) guide to the birds of neighboring Indonesia, there is not a uniformity of style. Such uniformity makes identifications easier. The illustrations are largely taken from Lynx Edicions' *Handbook of the Birds of the World* (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992–2013) in addition to a few necessary exceptions where the author has split a species and illustrations have apparently been commissioned specially for this work. That notwithstanding, it is unfortunate that yet again we have another field guide in which we see the same old illustrations trotted out (e.g. see Bishop 2017). This is another reason why I prefer Pratt & Beehler (2015) and Dutson (2011). The layout of the plates in Gregory's guide is highly variable, with some utilising space well and presenting birds in nicely sized and, in some, very attractive illustrations. Other plates have just three postage-stamp-size illustrations that strike me as a wasted opportunity. Given that the maps are so tiny, surely the available space could have permitted larger maps and in some cases larger illustrations or more illustrations per plate. One of the prime functions of such a guide is to permit the identification of difficult and similar species. Unarguably the single most challenging identification problem with New Guinea birds is that of the *Meliphaga* honeyeaters. I defy anyone, especially relative neophytes to New Guinea birding, to confidently and correctly identify members of this group based on the illustrations in this book.

Taxonomy is where I feel this guide falls down badly. Beehler & Pratt (2016) presented a clear and thorough appraisal of the taxonomic status of all mainland New Guinea (and satellite islands) birds. Although I disagree with a few of their decisions, they nevertheless provided a sound and stable platform upon which to present their arguments and upon which study of New Guinea birds can move forward. Dutson (2011) has done something somewhat similar for the Bismarck Archipelago and Bougainville. Gregory's taxonomic decisions, on the other hand, are all over the place and left me wondering what was going on. Many of the taxonomic decisions appear to be based on personal opinion without substantiated peer-reviewed assessment. For example, he splits familiar and well-established species such as the Pheasant Pigeon, Painted Tiger-Parrot, the fig-parrots, Blue-breasted and Hooded Pittas, cicadabirds, and drongos and lumps others such as Collared Kingfisher which others had previously split. As Cliff Frith (2017, p. 51) recently remarked, "The elevation of long and widely accepted subspecies to species results in the impracticable circumstance of multiple near-identical species that cannot be meaningfully illustrated or identified in the wild". If one were to accept the taxonomy of this book, that would most certainly be the case. It would appear that Gregory follows implicitly the higher taxonomy of Beehler & Pratt (2016) and yet given his propensity for novel taxonomy it is perhaps surprising that he did not incorporate, for example, the recent revision of the sparrowhawks and goshawks, which has them placed in *Tachyspiza* and *Astur* respectively. Harry Recher (2017, p. 317) said it all: "In my view, the problems with avian systematics have been made worse in recent years by the uncritical acceptance of molecular genetics techniques and the absence of quantitatively justified species limits as expressed by measurable genetic differences".

Finally, with regard to vocalisations, I quote from my recent review of Eaton *et al.* (2016): "Similar to many other field guides, this guide suffers from poor-quality descriptions of bird vocalisations. A good knowledge of vocalisations is of crucial importance for locating and identifying tropical forest birds" (Bishop 2017, p. 389). This is perhaps nowhere more true than in New Guinea where the birds can be very cryptic. "The use of diagrammatical representation of birdsong, such as produced by Diamond (in Pratt & Beehler 2015), for example, is less ambiguous and thus translatable and substantially more useful" (Bishop 2017, p. 389). I realise this is an old chestnut of mine but something I sincerely hope future producers of field guides, especially for tropical avifaunas, will rectify.

As with nearly all Lynx Edicions productions, this is a nicely produced publication. I am sure birders will be attracted to it because it splits more species and because of its greater geographic coverage. However, in my opinion, combining the New Guinea avifauna with that of the Bismarck Archipelago plus a small part of the Solomon Islands makes this book cumbersome and unwieldy, and it would have been much better published in two separate volumes. I obtained a review copy of this book and although I also own Dutson (2011) and Pratt & Beehler (2015) I might have bought this new guide too, but it would not be my personal choice to take into the field over the other two guides.

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