

*Handbook of the Birds of the World, Vol. 15 Weavers to New World Warblers* by J. del Hoyo, A. Elliott & D.A. Christie (Eds), Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, 2010, 25 × 31 cm, 880 pp. RRP \$430.

Most readers will by now surely be familiar with the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* series, of which this is volume 15 of a projected 16. Volume 1 was published in 1992 and presumably the series will be completed in a year or so. Fans of the series, of which I am sure there are many, can be confident that the very high standard of previous volumes is maintained here. (Those who deplore the lack of rigour in the preparation of far too many modern books can be assured that *HBW* does not compromise on the editing process, and this shows in the quality of the result.) Anyone who has been asleep for the last nearly 20 years since the first volume was published and who has not seen, and handled, one of these books is missing out and should seek to rectify the situation. Volume 15 continues the format of previous volumes: each family is the subject of a long and detailed general account covering Systematics, Morphological Aspects, Habitat, General Habits, Voice, Food and Feeding, Breeding, Movements, Relationship with Man, and Status and Conservation, illustrated with many photographs of the highest quality; following are the species accounts, comprising painted illustrations of each species and an account containing much detail for each, reminiscent of a voluminous and super-quality field-guide. As usual, in the case of the bigger families, each account would on its own make a substantial monograph. Also as usual, the accounts are contributed by world authorities on the respective subjects. The overall presentation is of the highest quality, in terms of both content and production values.

This volume covers eight passerine families: Ploceidae (weavers), Viduidae (whydahs and indigobirds), Estrildidae (waxbills), Vireonidae (vireos), Fringillidae (finches), Drepanididae (Hawaiian honeycreepers), Peucedramidae (Olive Warbler), and Parulidae (New World warblers). Of particular interest to Australian readers are the Estrildidae, containing our finches and mannikins along with the Blue-faced Parrot-Finch, and the Fringillidae, represented in Australia by four introduced species including the abundant (in places) European Goldfinch and Common Greenfinch. Various authorities have questioned the taxonomy in some previous volumes, including the place in the sequence of the so-called old-endemic Australian families amongst the passerines, but the question does not arise here: none of the families included in this volume is claimed to have originated in Australia and, to the extent that they occur here, the sequence agrees with that in our taxonomic 'bible', *Systematics and Taxonomy of Australian Birds* by Christidis and Boles (CSIRO Publishing 2008).

The Introduction to this volume reveals that *HBW* does not map ranges of introduced birds, and it is a bit strange to look at the world distribution of, for example, the European Goldfinch and see Australia blank when in fact the species now occupies a huge range in the south-east of this continent. At the species level perhaps another colour (to go along with yellow — breeding, blue — non-breeding, and green — species present all year round) to indicate the introduced range of a species might be in order. In this context, though, it would be a pity to spoil the world distribution maps that begin the family accounts and which are a wonderful illustration of the concept of biogeographic regions.

Many volumes of *HBW* have had a noteworthy Foreword on an ornithological topic. In this volume it is 'Conservation of the world's birds: The view from 2010', and it occupies fully 68 pages with its own extensive bibliography and large numbers

of illustrative figures, mainly maps and graphs. The title is self-explanatory: the authors review the current status of the world's birds, then discuss in turn a depressingly long list of 'principal threats to birds'. They conclude that the world's birds are in a 'depressingly poor state' but go on to discuss a 'suite of conservation approaches that are available to tackle the current crisis that can and do work' and conclude that 'there are many reasons to be optimistic despite the parlous state of nature in 2010, and notwithstanding the long catalogue of anthropogenic pressures on birds'.

I could go on about this volume and this series, but suffice to note that numerous reviews of previous volumes, in this journal and elsewhere, over many years have lauded this series and emphasised the quality of its presentation. In volume 15 the standard is maintained and, although the price is high, in the case of the *Handbook* one can see where the money goes. This is a great piece of work.

*Andrew Ley*