

Review –

The Birds of Prey of Australia, A Field Guide to Australian Raptors by Stephen Debus. Oxford University Press, Melbourne, in association with Birds Australia, 1998. Softcover, pp. 152, 21.5 × 13.5 cm, 45 colour plates, numerous line drawings. RRP \$19.95.

Guides to the identification of Australian diurnal raptors (eagles, hawks and falcons) have come a very long way since *An Australian Bird Book, What Bird is That?* and H. T. Condon's *A Field Guide to Australian Hawks*. The appearance of Peter Slater's first volume of *Field Guide to Australian Birds* in 1970 represented a quantum leap for the identification of local raptors and provided a benchmark for all subsequent field guides. Australian raptorophiles have also been well served by several excellent books devoted to the subject since the early 1980s, starting with *Hawks in Focus* by Jack and Lindsay Cupper, and culminating in Penny Olsen's recent *Australian Birds of Prey*. The most detailed treatment of the subject remains *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic Birds, Volume 2, Raptors to Lapwings (HANZAB)*. This tome contains a wealth of information on the identification and biology of Australian eagles, hawks and falcons. Unfortunately, *HANZAB* is large and expensive; neither quality recommends it for use in the field. *The Birds of Prey of Australia, A Field Guide to Australian Raptors* by Stephen Debus represents an attempt by the publishers and Birds Australia to redress this situation.

Stephen Debus' book is a field guide, and is essentially constructed around condensed and up-dated 'Field Identification' sections from *HANZAB*. It includes the excellent colour plates and line drawings from the larger work. The reproduction of the plates is good, but a little pale (at least in the copy that I have). Unlike *HANZAB*, the present book also contains a number of coloured photographic plates. These are clear, with good colour separation, and are largely well chosen. Some will appear familiar as they have been published before, for example, in Penny Olsen's book. This 'recycling' of photographs is fairly commonplace in Australian natural history publishing, and the present book is by no means unique in this regard. The photographs show raptors in a variety of poses. A section of photographs of all species in flight would have been a valuable addition to the book, but to some extent the *HANZAB* plates do the job.

The text is clear, concise, readable and free of obvious typographical errors. The book contains a general introduction, individual species accounts, a section on threats and conservation, a glossary and a bibliography. I was pleased to see cautionary comments in the introduction concerning the handling of live raptors. The species accounts are divided into the following sections: Description; Distribution; Food and Hunting; Behaviour; Breeding; and Threats and Conservation. All sections, except 'Description', are brief, and those readers who require more detailed information will still need to consult *HANZAB*. The information contained in these supporting sections (except 'Threats and Conservation') seems to have been largely chosen to aid the species descriptions, and assist the identification process. Together, these sections also provide a short, general reference to the biology of individual species and their conservation. However, the book remains a field guide and the provision of these is not intrusive.

Descriptions of individual species proceed along the same basic layout as *HANZAB*. That is, the reader is led from a general description of a species to

specific features of plumage and behaviour. A paragraph discussing similar species concludes each account. Here, I met with one of my few quibbles with the book. This is a field guide, and is likely to be consulted with speed, possibly immediately after an odd raptor has passed overhead. Consequently, I feel that the similar-species paragraph should have been highlighted with bold type (as was done with descriptions of adult, juvenile, immature and chicks in a preceding paragraph). The reader receives some assistance by having this section appear as the final paragraph of the species account, but users in the field would certainly appreciate the highlighting of this very valuable section.

The Birds of Prey of Australia, A Field Guide to Australian Raptors will probably attract criticism because of its failure to include distribution maps. However, I do not regard this as a serious omission. With the exception of a few species, such as the Pacific Baza *Aviceda subcristata* and Red Goshawk *Erythrotriorchis radiatus*, most species can be encountered almost anywhere on the mainland, even if only as a vagrant. In many parts of northern and eastern Australia, an unidentified raptor could potentially be any one of the species covered by the book. Basically, I feel that identification of any raptor should be based around the consideration of all possibilities. By doing this as a matter of course, we learn more, and also stand a much better chance of identifying extra-regional vagrants, should they be observed.

The book includes two vagrant species: Gurney's Eagle *Aquila gurneyi* and Eastern Marsh Harrier *Circus pilionotus*. In the interest of consistency, I would have preferred to see the distribution of Gurney's Eagle separately (as with all other species) and not treated as part of the species description. Secondly, I think that it would have been preferable to discuss the problem of dark-hooded, first-immature Spotted Harriers *C. assimilis* and Eastern Marsh Harriers in the paragraph on similar species in the Spotted Harrier description. The matter is noted in the section on immature plumages (p. 65) but it is somewhat lost here. The possible confusion of these birds is covered in the Eastern Marsh Harrier account (p. 74), but I think that it would have been more effective to treat the matter as a similar species problem in both accounts.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, the author and publisher have produced a well-written and stylish publication that deserves a place not only on the bookshelf but also in the car glove-box. The book also has sufficient information to make it very useful for school projects, because it answers a lot of those general questions about 'what do they look like?', 'where are they found?' and so on. Copies in school libraries could play an important educational role. I can only hope that Oxford University Press and Birds Australia will keep producing similar books on difficult groups of birds as *HANZAB* spin-offs — now, how about one on seabirds?

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