

Book Reviews

A guide to the Birds of Trinidad & Tobago 2nd edition

Richard ffrench. Plates and drawings by John P. O'Neill, portraits by Don R. Eckelberry. 1991.

Comstock Publishing Associates, a division of Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York. xvii + 426 pp.

I

This publication completely updates the first edition of this unique and indispensable work, which was published in 1973 and last revised in the early 1980's. Although that edition is still useable, the new edition contains many improvements and a plethora of new information.

Illustrations are the heart of a field guide. The original paintings were very good, but I feel that an opportunity has been lost to eliminate confusion due to crowding. All of the colour plates have been reprinted intact at the same size as in the first edition, even though the new edition features a larger page size. A better use of the larger page size would have been to reposition male-female pairs and to provide more space among species, especially on the plates of the hummingbirds, manakins, and tanagers. Many plates now depict rather small images of birds tightly clumped on pages with wide, unused margins.

John O'Neill painted one new colour plate for this edition, illustrating such gorgeous but unrelated species as Channel-billed Toucan and Scarlet Ibis. The exceptional whiteness of the paper on which the plates are printed adds to the brilliance of the colours.

All of the portraits from the first edition have been consolidated at the center of the book, following the plates, which makes finding them much easier than before. The portraits would have been even more accessible had they been inserted in phylogenetic order among the plates rather than being lumped after them. The present arrangement, however, still is better than that in the first edition. As in the first edition, 24 species are illustrated as line drawings. A dozen of these drawings

have been recast in far better detail than in the first edition.

As expected in a new edition, the information presented here has been updated and expanded from that in the first edition. The original introduction was so thorough that little could be added here except for a few timely updates, such as the recovery of certain species in Tobago. Several tables have been revised to reflect new information on the occurrence of migratory species in Trinidad and Tobago.

The body of the book consists of detailed accounts of more than 400 species of birds. Suffice it to say that ffrench has done another masterful job of pulling together the old and the new and has added descriptions of several species new to Trinidad and Tobago. Birders familiar with the first edition will appreciate the large amount of new information that ffrench has added to the existing species descriptions, drawing upon firsthand reports from competent birders as well as the literature base. When one considers the length of time required to produce a book of this nature, it is amazing to find that it includes records as current as February 1991, only six months before publication.

Among the other improvements, ffrench has incorporated the latest American Ornithologists Union names, substituting Whistling-Duck for Tree-duck, Common Piping-Guan for Trinidad Piping-Guan, Olivaceous Cormorant for Neotropical Cormorant, etc. Such consistency should ease the synonym problem for users comparing species descriptions among field guides. The titles of some of the plates have been changed to more accurately reflect their content, e.g., "Large Raptors" instead of "Hawks and Vulture", "Medium-sized and

Small Raptors” instead of “Kites and Falcons”, and “Hermits and Larger Hummingbirds” and “Smaller Hummingbirds” instead of just “Hummingbirds”.

Welcome evidence of editorial generosity pervades the text. The editor has been especially generous with eye-relieving white space such as blank lines between table of contents items and between topics in the species accounts. Such breaks are especially helpful in allowing the eye to locate section headings quickly. In the same vein, almost all of the figures, maps, and photographs have been printed larger than in the first edition. Moreover, the resolution of the photographs has been enhanced. Finally, the type is set more tightly than in the first edition, which makes for easier reading.

Besides being technically accurate, the author has performed a valuable service by pointing out, in the

It will not hurt to have two reviews of such an important book as this, though mine only enlarges on some of the matters already raised by Murphy. Perhaps, we in Trinidad and Tobago are fortunate in having only 450 species as against the 900 species in Venezuela, for the smaller number makes it practical to give in a conveniently sized book a summary of everything known about the birds rather than just descriptions and notes on habitat and distribution. The importance of this cannot be overemphasized. It makes the book much more than just a field guide and calls attention to the gaps in our knowledge as well as what is known. French mentions this in his preface and we can thank him for taking this approach since we, the inhabitants of these islands, are largely cut off from the stream of research running through the journals of the more advanced countries.

French has scoured the literature and brought us up to date in this edition. Only a few examples will have to suffice. There are records of newly arrived species such as the Double-striped Thick-knee; new records of breeding such as those of the Yellow-headed Caracara and the White-tailed Kite; new information on breeding, such as the incubation and fledging times for the Yellow-hooded Blackbird; new information on feeding behaviour, such as that for the Copper-rumped Hummingbird; even better descriptions of some calls such as that of the Scaled Pigeon. (“A deep cooing in 2 syllables, *croo-kuk*, or in 4 syllables, *cuck-a-loo-oo*, the accent on the penultimate” is **better** than the original “a deep cooing in 2 syllables, the **first** longer than the second, *croo-kuk*”, though I still

species accounts, species that have been decimated by human disturbance and hunting. He calls for additional protection for species that, as everywhere, are being threatened by unrestricted clearing of land and unenforced restrictions or bans on hunting.

All books described as “field guides” should be portable. This edition meets that criterion, being midway in size between the National Geographic Society’s Field Guide to Birds of North America and Stiles and Skutch’s A Guide to the Birds of Costa Rica. It fits comfortably into a belt-strap book pouch. Those who balk at the weight of the hardcover version (suggested list price US\$72.50) will welcome the availability of a rugged softback version (about US\$35.00).

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think that the bird calls *oo-wooo-uh-dit*, repeated once or twice and finishing on *oo-wooo*).

Some minor changes of arrangement may not at first be noticed, but they point to major changes taking place in taxonomy. The Green Heron, *Butorides virescens*, is now considered to be identical to the Striated Heron, *B. striatus*, so both common names have been abandoned in favour of Green-backed Heron (*Butorides striatus*). The Bright-rumped Atilla, the White-winged Becard and the Black-tailed Tityra, formerly classified in the Cotingidae, are now placed with the Tyrant Flycatchers. The Bicoloured Conebill, the Purple Honeycreeper, the Red-legged Honeycreeper, the Green Honeycreeper and the Blue Dacnis, all formerly classified with the Bananaquit in the Coeribidae, have now been moved to the Thraupidae with the Tanagers. Some taxonomists now favour lumping all the Thraupidae with the Icteridae as well as other radical changes. Mercifully, French has left his classification pretty much as it was. He alludes to this in his introduction (p 29) where he states “I agree with those other authors of major works on Neotropical Avifauna.....that since classification is presently in a state of flux, it would be premature to adopt major taxonomic changes...” However, if the more radical changes are supported by research with the more modern techniques of gene analysis, and become more widely accepted, the third edition in 15 years time may well have a different look. In the meantime, let us welcome this edition as a fine achievement which can only enhance the reputation which the author gained with the original edition.

Victor C. Quesnel (Ed.)