Hong Kong has a long tradition of bird-recording. The first documented observations were made in 1860, by Robert Swinhoe, and much has been published on Hong Kong’s birds since then, particularly in the last 50 years. There has been a succession of field guides to the birds of the former British colony, and the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society (HKBWS) has published an annual report since 1958. The previous work on the status and distribution of Hong Kong’s birds reached four editions, but this new Avifauna eclipses all of them. It is in a league of its own.

The introductory sections, amounting to more than 100 pages, cover such topics as the history of ornithology in Hong Kong, physical characteristics, climate, the breeding-bird survey, winter waterbird counts, and bird-ringing. These are informative and well written. A complete species list of the species and stories are American. On the other hand, the families covered include more than half of all bird families and have a very high overlap with those which are represented in Europe. Bird biology is, of course, universal, although favoured subjects vary. It is especially interesting to see how active and important systematics and taxonomy are in America compared with Europe. The spelling is American throughout, with the exception of the title. Someone must have feared that ‘Behavior’ in the title would deter Europeans. I do not think that it should.

Colin Bibby
is also included, as well as breeding-distribution maps (based on the first comprehensive breeding-bird survey of Hong Kong), and a selection of bird and habitat photographs.

The species accounts comprise the bulk of the book and these are impressive. Each account begins with a summary of world range and taxonomy, followed by a detailed analysis of the status and distribution in Hong Kong. This is based on 41 years of HKBWS records and surveys, while comparisons are made with data collated as long ago as 1861. Most accounts are accompanied by one or two graphs. Enormous numbers of records were analysed in order to prepare these charts, and the authors have succeeded in presenting a vast amount of information clearly and succinctly.

This important book has been produced to the highest standards. The paper is of top quality, the layout is clear and uncluttered, and the two-colour maps add to the ease of interpretation. The artistic cover may not be to everyone's taste, but inside these unassuming covers there lies a veritable treasure trove of information. This is an essential reference to the status and distribution of birds in south China, and anyone with an interest in this region should buy a copy. Nigel Redman

WRENS, DIPPERS AND THRASHERS

Wrens, Dippers and Thrashers will appeal primarily to those birders who live in or visit the Americas, where 121 of the 124 species treated are endemic. Winter Wren Troglodytes troglodytes also occurs widely in North America, and only Eurasian Dipper Cinclus cinclus and Brown Dipper C. pallasii are absent from the two continents.

The book contains short sections entitled contents, acknowledgements, introduction, explanation of the species accounts, classification and relationships, conservation issues, topography, bibliography, index and regional maps. The latter comprise maps of Central and South America which show the provinces named in the distribution sections of the species accounts. Where appropriate, these chapters seem to have been well researched.

Each of the 32 full-page colour plates covers, on average, four species, and contains nine or ten images. Every bird is coded, and is captioned on a facing page with its age, and sex where relevant, and comments on its structure and plumage; there are also statements on each species’ habitat and range. To my eye, the quality of the paintings falls short of the high standard which we have come to expect from books in this series. In many cases, the proportions are wrong, the posture is not lifelike, the plumage is too dark and cold-toned, and the birds look unnaturally scruffy. An over-reliance on museum specimens may have been a contributory factor. Furthermore, there are no paintings of birds in flight; such images should have been included for certain species in order to illustrate distinctive wing and tail patterns.

The systematic section is 160 pages long. The species accounts are subdivided under the headings identification, description, geographical variation, voice, habitat, habits, status and distribution, breeding, food, movements and measurements; all include a distribution map. Understandably, the accounts of historically less well-studied endemic Central and South American species are shorter (on average, just over a page long) than those of species which occur in the USA and elsewhere (on average, two pages long). This major portion of the book appears to have been as thoroughly researched as the impressive bibliography suggests, and a wealth of information is authoritatively presented. The attention to detail is such that a number of obscure points of interest can be found in the text, including the occurrence of a Cactus Wren Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus (an apparently sedentary species in southwestern USA and Mexico) in Saskatchewan, Canada, during a blizzard, and the existence of both Dr John Le Conte, after whom Le Conte’s Thrasher Toxostoma lecontei is named, and his cousin, another Dr John Le Conte, of Le Conte’s Sparrow Ammodramus lecontei fame.

At £35.00, Wrens, Dippers and Thrashers, with its 32 colour plates and 272 pages in total, is over-priced compared with some other recently published books in the same series: Thrushes, with 60 colour plates and 463 pages overall, also costs £35.00, while Pigeons and Doves, with 76 colour plates and a total of 615 pages, is priced at £38.00. Many of those who bought one or both of these other books after little more than a glance at some of the splendid plates will need longer to discover that Wrens, Dippers and Thrashers, mainly on the strength of its extremely well-written text, also deserves a place on their bookshelves.

Peter Lansdown
This is the first book since the nineteenth century to cover all the world’s sunbirds, flowerpeckers and spiderhunters (Nectariniidae) in detail, while the allied subfamily of sugarbirds (Promeropinae) is included, too. The introductory sections cover topography, morphology, relationships and taxonomy, behaviour, breeding, distribution and habitat, parasites, mortality and predators, physiology, migration and other movements, economic importance and conservation. There are 15 pages of references, with approximately 900 citations.

The heart of the book is, of course, the illustrations and the individual species accounts. The plates are excellent, well laid-out, aesthetically pleasing and accurate. Richard Allen’s attempts to show the iridescence on sunbirds are quite subtle, and present a less garish iridescence than is found in some other species’ presence on Zanzibar Island and Pemba Island, Tanzania, when in fact it is the preceding species, Eastern Olive Sunbird C. cyanolaema, that is found there. Close reference to The Birds of Africa Vol. VI (Fry, Keith & Urban 2000) would have avoided errors such as a vagrant to that country, even though these records were dismissed in The Birds of Africa. Tsavo Purple-banded Sunbird Cinnys tsavoensis is described (incorrectly?) as occurring in southern Ethiopia and Sudan, though not mapped for either.

This is a beautiful and well-produced book which is both a delight to browse through and a great source of detailed information. It is a worthy addition to the series and, being the first monograph on the group to be published since 1880, is surely destined to become the standard work for some time to come.

Iain Robertson

GULLS: A VIDEO GUIDE TO THE GULLS OF EUROPE, ASIA & NORTH AMERICA

Filmed by Paul Doherty; narrated by Bill Oddie. Bird Images Video Guides, Sherburn in Elmet, 2001. Double video set; running time 5 hours 32 minutes; at least 56 taxa covered. £27.95.

The latest in an impressive list of video guides filmed by Paul Doherty, this double cassette deals with all the familiar (and some less familiar) gull (Laridae) taxa of the northern hemisphere. It is a comprehensive distillation of much of the current proliferation of work on gull identification, illustrating at least 56 taxa in a range of age-classes with high-quality video footage, complemented by freeze-frames and some still photographs.

A 12-minute introduction provides an excellent summary of how to approach gull identification, which includes details of ageing, moult, and plumage topography, and stresses the bewildering range of individual variation. Each of the more distinct taxa is then treated separately, with a general introduction followed by an overview of status and distribution, including...
comments on real, as well as potential, vagrancy patterns. Poorly understood subspecies or forms are also mentioned in some accounts (e.g. Black-headed Gull Larus ridibundus of the form sibiricus and California Gull L. californicus of the form albertiensis). The identification accounts describe size and structure, followed by plumage details from juveniles through to adults, all footage being labelled with dates and locations. For closely related species, very useful direct comparisons are made by using freeze-frame and stills to highlight the main plumage criteria for separation. Finally, the calls of most gulls are given, a surprisingly useful feature in locating some species.

This is an excellent video, with some superb footage (the Red-legged Kittiwakes Rissa brevirostris are quite stunning) which I really enjoyed watching. The commentary is easy to follow, and Bill Oddie did not get where he is today without being able to keep viewers entertained (despite the – arguably – rather dry subject matter). The work is thorough and clearly well researched and, in particular, I liked the pragmatic approach adopted, avoiding some of the dogma associated with current gull identification and taxonomy. While there is some treatment of hybrid gulls (particularly from the west coast of North America), I felt that this could have been expanded to include, for example, Herring L. argentatus × Lesser Black-backed Gulls L. fuscus. I would also have appreciated some advice concerning where to watch gulls (most birders do not habitually visit landfill sites, sewage outfalls or pig farms) and the most appropriate weather conditions to choose (cold, sunny days are quite the worst conditions). These are, however, minor quibbles. This video provides an excellent reference for even the most seasoned gull-watchers, as well as for reasonably experienced birders who have yet to grasp the proverbial nettle, although there is perhaps rather too much detail here for beginners. At just over five-and-a-half hours, there is a lot of material to get through, and even for the most obsessed gull-fanatic this is a lot to watch. Surely, a DVD or CD-ROM version would make it a much more practical source of reference; not since watching the film Basic Instinct have I employed the pause and rewind buttons so much on my video.

Love them or loathe them, gulls always generate some form of debate. If you wish to be a little more informed, this video is well worth buying, although there is no substitute for your local rubbish dump.

Stephen Votier

At last, Norfolk, Britain’s premier county for birdwatching, has its own site guide, and this well-produced book is most welcome. With a suitable colour photograph adorning the front cover, the authors have divided the county into four main areas: West, North, East and the Broads, and the Brecks. Within each area, the birdwatching sites are described in detail, with excellent maps for the most important locations. It was good to see the Birdwatcher’s Code of Conduct brought to prominence at the beginning, and spread over two pages.

The individual site entries contain a great deal of information on a selection of species throughout the year. The location, the car-parks and how to get there are all noted, using Ordnance Survey six-figure map references, and the opening times and access arrangements of reserves are well covered. A selection of ‘birdwatching tips’ for each site is most useful when planning a trip, particularly for special species. I especially liked the inclusion of directions to the nearest garage and other useful amenities.

There is obviously some bias towards the famed north Norfolk coast, and certainly this is true for Holme, Titchwell, Holkham, Wells and Cley. It was good to see other less well-known areas mentioned, such as Stiffkey Fen and Kelling Quags, although I found the omission of Scolt Head’s potential, and of the seawatching facilities and track-record of both Sheringham and Cromer, puzzling. In the East and Broads section, which I know best, 20 chosen sites were well spread out, and in most cases care-fully researched. In Great Yarmouth, however, Mediterranean Gulls Larus melanocephalus are best looked for in the central beach area, not north of the town, and the harbour entrance is, sadly, no longer a haunt of Purple Sandpipers Calidris maritima, although these are, admittedly, only minor inaccuracies. I would also have chosen to include both Winterton south dunes and the Burgh Castle area. For the West section, it was good to see the Cambridgeshire Ouse Washes mentioned (since they link up with Welney), but, for the Brecks, the authors have listed Mayday Farm without mentioning that it is in fact in Suffolk.

The book concludes with a full Norfolk species list, plus a list of all useful addresses, together with telephone numbers and websites. I thought that the book was a little overpriced for a spiral-bound volume, but it is easy to read and is an essential guide for all seasoned birdwatchers who live in or intend to visit this magical county.

Peter Allard
Hong Kong has technically remained an island apart even under Beijing’s authority. The former colony was supposed to be preserved as a “special administrative region,” able to maintain its own governance system, courts, schools and regulations under the “One Country, Two Systems” formula. Even today, an American like myself can waltz visa-free into Hong Kong while Chinese from the mainland still require permission to visit. And, of course, Hong Kong has a different language, with Cantonese still preferred over the mainland’s Mandarin. To many in Hong Kong, the return to China is not the “homec