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
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 leconteii 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 toponomy, 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 in other works, while still conveying something of the brilliance of the birds’ plumage. Backgrounds are also pleasing and show either typical habitat or food plants. The images are mostly numbered consecutively and in the same order as on the opposing caption page. Distinctive races are portrayed and, in some cases, immature or non-breeding males are illustrated. The subjects include some of the most colourful birds in the world and, with some figures approaching life-size, this is one of the most attractive of the Helm Identification Guides.

The species accounts follow the now familiar format, and concentrate mainly on identification, status and distribution. ‘Geographical variation’ describes subspecies and their range. The grey-scale maps are very clear and use a variety of tones, as appropriate. Measurements include mass but do not give an overall size. The sequence, taxonomy and English names are fairly standard, and based mainly on Distribution and Taxonomy of Birds of the World (Sibley & Monroe 1990). The few changes include the separation of Grey-headed Sunbird Delicornis axillaris from Scarlet-tufted Sunbird D. fraseri, and different generic names for Ruby-cheeked Sunbird Chalcoparia (Anthreptes) singalensis and Golden-winged Sunbird Drepantorhynchus (Nectarinia) reichenowi.

I noticed few errors. The map for Western Olive Sunbird Cynamomitra obscura indicates the species’ presence on Zanzibar Island and Pemba Island, Tanzania, when in fact it is the preceding species, Eastern Olive Sunbird C. olivacea, that is found there. Closer reference to The Birds of Africa Vol. VI (Fry, Keith & Urban 2000) would have avoided errors such as mapping Blue-throated Brown Sunbird C. cyanolaema for Kenya, and also giving an altitudinal range there, despite the single record from Kakamega having been rejected. Bronze Sunbird Nectarinia kilimensis is mapped for Ethiopia and Red-chested Sunbird Cinnyris erythrocerca mentioned as a vagrant to that country, even though these records were dismissed in The Birds of Africa. Tsavo Purple-banded Sunbird Cinnyris 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.

Lain Robertson

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
Some species. Surprisingly useful feature in locating calls of most gulls are given, a sur-
testria for separation. Finally, the highlight the main plumage cri-
using freeze-frame and stills to direct comparisons are made by closely related species, very useful with dates and locations. For
details from juveniles through to structure, followed by plumage 
cation accounts describe size and 
form
bundus

California Gull

L. californicus

Lesser Black-backed Gulls L. fuscus. I would also have appreciated some advice con-
cerning where to watch gulls (most birders do not habitually visit land-
fill 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 refer-
ce for even the most seasoned gull-watchers, as well as for rea-
sonably 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-pro-
duced 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 bird-
watching 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 ‘bird-
watching tips’ for each site is most useful when planning a trip, partic-
ularly for special species. I es-
pecially 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 melanoccephalus 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 Sand-
pipers 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

NORFOLK: A BIRDWATCHER’S SITE GUIDE

By Phil Benstead, Steve Rowland & Richard Thomas.

Reviews