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CLUB ANNOUNCEMENTS

Report on the joint meeting on *Neotropical birds* with the Neotropical Bird Club and the Natural History Museum in the Flett Theatre, NHM, London, 17 September 2016

This second joint one-day meeting between BOC, NBC and NHM took place five years after the inaugural one in 2011. A highly enthusiastic, but in size somewhat disappointing, audience of *c.*60 people was treated to five impressive main talks, as well as shorter contributions by Raymond Jeffers on the NBC fundraising tours programme and by Chris Storey, who outlined the planned changes to how the BOC will operate.

During the morning session, Christina Banks-Leite, Imperial College London, opened with a presentation on *How to save birds in the Brazilian Atlantic Forest on a shoestring*. The endangered species-rich avifauna here inhabits one of the most threatened biodiversity hotspots in the world. Despite few recorded avian extinctions, the bird community has been strongly impacted by extensive deforestation, which in turn has had important consequences for functioning of ecosystems. Based on research to date, she highlighted cost-effective approaches to reforestation aimed at providing adequate habitat for long-term conservation of the unique bird community. She was followed by Alex Lees, formerly at the Goeldi Museum in Belém but just taking up a position at Manchester Metropolitan University, who drew on his long-term experience of working on the ecology and conservation of Amazonian avifauna to address the broader issue of *Bridging shortfalls in Brazilian ornithology*. He approached this by considering current shortfalls in understanding of bird biodiversity within seven contexts: evolutionary patterns (Darwinian), species taxonomy (Linnean), species distribution (Wallacean), abiotic tolerance (Hutchinsonian), abundance (Prestonian), species traits (Raunkiaeran) and biotic interactions (Eltonian). To have any hope of addressing massive ongoing habitat loss and likely concomitant avian extinctions, ornithology in Brazil needs to make full use of new technologies from full genome sequencing through satellite telemetry to large-scale citizen science initiatives, to provide the evidence necessary to bring about political and legal action.

In the afternoon, Thomas Donegan, council member of Fundación ProAves de Colombia, summarised much of his research on a diverse array of Colombian birds over the past 20 years in a complex talk addressing the topic of *What is a species and what is a subspecies? A new look at an old question, based on Colombian birds*. Developing and extending the approach being used by BirdLife in the new *HBW-BirdLife illustrated checklist of the birds of the world*, the subject of Nigel Collar's final talk of the day (see below), Thomas provided and defended novel recommendations for assessing species and subspecies rank in a consistent manner. Moving from the general to the particular, Fabrice Schmitt, recently returned to France after living and studying birds in Chile for ten years, presented a fascinating travelogue entitled *White-masked Antbird unmasked*, hung on a seven-man amateur expedition to the Amazonian lowlands of northern Peru in 2013. Primarily aimed at rediscovering the rare and enigmatic *Pithys castaneus* at the location where it was first found in 1937, the talk ranged widely over the habitats visited and diversity of organisms found, highlighting successes and failures alike. Closing the conference, Nigel Collar of BirdLife International provided a heavyweight but involving contribution on *Changes and challenges in the HBW-BirdLife checklist of Neotropical passerine species*. BirdLife's aim of promoting effective conservation priorities by applying a set of standard criteria (the Tobias criteria), based on morphological and acoustic evidence, to resolving problems of species limits in the global avifauna produced a mixed response, part laudatory and part critical, following the publication of the first (non-passerine) volume of the *Illustrated checklist of the birds of the world* in 2014. Nigel outlined how Neotropical passerines will fare in the forthcoming second volume, highlighting some of the challenges both to taxonomy and to conservation that have emerged from the endeavour.

Robert Prŷs-Jones

REVIEWS

Beehler, B. M. & Pratt, T. K. 2016. *Birds of New Guinea: distribution, taxonomy, and systematics*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. 668 pp, two pages of colour photographs. ISBN 978-0-691-16424-3. £55.95.

The publication in 2015 of a revised field guide to the birds of New Guinea, also by Thane Pratt and Bruce Beehler, was cause for widespread relief among the ever-growing legion of travelling birdwatchers eager to sample the avian delights of the world's second-largest island, as the only previous such work (Beehler *et al.*

1986, *Birds of New Guinea*) had long been out of print and was available only on the second-hand market at a hefty price. The present work represents the all-important 'bricks-and-mortar' underpinning the content in the new field guide, providing a detailed résumé of the status and distribution, in addition to taxonomy, of all bird species currently accepted to have occurred in New Guinea. For anyone with a serious interest in the avifauna of the Australo-Papuan region as a whole, or indeed global avian taxonomy, Beehler & Pratt's field guide sequel will be quite simply an indispensable and frequently referred-to purchase.

Fairly brief introductions to the New Guinea region, particularly its geography and bird habitats, as well as avian taxonomy generally, explained with specific reference to the region's birds, as well as explanatory notes concerning the layout of the species accounts commence the work. The meat of the book, more than 480 pages, comprises the family, genera, species and subspecies accounts. Resident species and those (many) endemic to New Guinea receive the most detailed treatment, with in-depth range statements, sometimes including lists of known localities (but no maps), data concerning elevational distribution, range outside New Guinea (where relevant), discussions of subspecific diagnosis, and occasionally extensive notes that treat all manner of additional topics, e.g. knowledge of the species, conservation status, alternative taxonomic treatments, gaps in our understanding, and so forth. For all generic, species and subspecies taxa, full citation details are presented. Throughout the accounts, the authors' personal research shines through, but also deep knowledge of the literature (the bibliography that follows the species accounts runs to 35 pages) and an extensive array of contact with other observers. The book terminates in an extensive gazetteer that runs to more than 70 pages, plus the usual indices.

My only criticism is for the publisher rather than the authors. The two pages of 14 colour photographs of specimens that precede the species accounts seem positively churlish, given the number of images that presumably could have usefully been included. Of course, a significant amount of colour would have necessitated an ever-higher retail price for what is already a fairly expensive book, but I would imagine that most would-be purchasers of this work (many fewer than for the field guide inevitably) would have 'stomached' a few extra pounds, dollars or euros.

As already intimated above, this work is a positive goldmine and no-one with a serious interest in the birds of New Guinea should be without it. Those, like me, yet to visit, will surely revel in such a magnificent introduction to the region, with the extensive bibliography and gazetteer alone being substantial navigational aids. Much of the literature on bird distributions in New Guinea is in relatively hard-to-find local newsletters and reports (although *Muruk* is now happily available online: <http://s2travel.com.au/WP/muruk-papua-new-guinea-bird-society/>), making this book an exceptional guide even for those better initiated than myself. Bruce Beehler, Thane Pratt and the book's technical editor, Mary LeCroy, have done the ornithological world proud, yet again.

Guy M. Kirwan

Perron, R. M. 2016. *Taxonomy of the genus Casuarius*. Quantum Conservation, Aylesbury, UK. 95 pp, many colour photographs. ISBN 978-3-86523-272-4. £15.95.

Despite being a small family of a very large and impressive birds, the cassowaries (family Casuariidae) have presented something of a problem for avian taxonomists, with three or four species in one genus, *Casuarius*, being typically recognised in recent works. Whereas Dickinson & Remsen (2013, *The Howard and Moore complete checklist of the birds of the world*), del Hoyo & Collar (2014, *The HBW and BirdLife International illustrated checklist of the birds of the world*) and Beehler & Pratt (2016, see above) all treated the genus as comprising three species, Southern Cassowary *C. casuarius*, Dwarf Cassowary *C. bennetti* and Northern Cassowary *C. unappendiculatus*, Davies (2002, *Ratites and tinamous*) accepted a fourth species, Westermann's Cassowary *C. papuanus*. Subspecific variation and the ranges ascribed to the various taxa are even more complex.

In this booklet-sized work, Richard Perron recognises three species, in line with the majority of other recent authors. Following a short general introduction to the history and taxonomy of the genus, the meat of the book comprises a taxon-by-taxon listing of all 48 names erected for different *Casuarius*. Each one is illustrated (in full colour) either by a photograph (some of rather average quality) or, more typically, using a reproduction from the relevant type description. The text for each taxon includes, among others, its currently accepted synonym, author, type locality, collector, the whereabouts of the holotype, original description (usually repeated verbatim) and any remarks or notes. In truth, in these days of the Biodiversity Heritage Library (<http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/>), much of this information is relatively easily accessible to anyone with a computer, or even a smartphone, but those with a serious interest in ratites will probably welcome having all of it in one place.

Having reviewed the evidence, Perron accepts the following subspecific taxa of Southern Cassowary, *C. c. casuarius*, *C. c. galeatus*, *C. c. aruensis*, *C. c. johnsonii* and *C. c. sclateri*. Under Dwarf Cassowary, Perron recognises four groups and admits that one of them, the *C. b. westermanni* group, might be better treated specifically (supporting Davies' position), although he is unclear as to how many subspecies should be recognised. As for Northern Cassowary, the author regards all variation as clinal, thereby apparently advocating monotypy.

The book closes with a single page each devoted to acknowledgements and references.

Guy M. Kirwan

REFEREES

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