



**West African Ornithological Society
Société d'Ornithologie de l'Ouest
Africain**



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Two points of design attract comment. First, there are no references in the text and, forewarned, I thought that I would find this concession to "readability" irritating. In fact, it improves the style and should not create great problems for those wishing to pursue points further, because a full bibliography is given at the end, cross-referenced by chapter and species; I liked the idea. Second, all the tables are collected at the back, although the figures accompany the text. This idiosyncratic arrangement I found inconvenient and it led to my simply ignoring most of the tables. This was perhaps a concession to non-scientists, but surely not a necessary one.

The title is modest, in that the first chapter is a global survey of species and speciation (including American vultures), which sets out some original views. The other comparative chapters are similarly not restricted to African species.

Individual accounts of the 11 African species, each accompanied by a nice painting by Butchart in somewhat 19th-century style (intended as a compliment), take up 161 pages. Each starts with an interesting tale of the species' discovery and naming, followed by a description and biological account. This was the only major section of the book which I skimmed, rather than reading from beginning to end; inevitably, as a collection of facts about individual species, it makes relatively dry reading but the facts are valuable and will be indispensable to vulture enthusiasts. Getting towards the end of this section, I realised that I had still only reached the middle of the book. The remaining half is packed with photographs, accompanying more comparative chapters, attractively and penetratingly analytical in style and wide in scope. One on foraging, feeding and socializing discusses guilds, food location, competition between species and with non-vultures, bill morphology, sequence of events at carcasses, types and sources of food, food webs, an analysis of the Serengeti ecosystem and gathering places. There are chapters on the role of vultures in African cultures (San, Egyptian, SE African Bantu), modern attitudes, threats and the Vulture Study Group. This last was the only one I did not like; it is entirely southern African in context, with nauseatingly endless lists of the authors' friends. These minutiae are not really of great interest to anyone other than the characters involved and the chapter could have been much shorter. This aside, I found the book an excellent read and I thoroughly recommend it.

Alan Tye

The Birds of Africa, Vol. 4. Ed. by S. Keith, E.K. Urban & C.H. Fry, 1992. 609pp., 32 colour plates. Academic Press, London. ISBN 0-12-137304-5. £72.

At last this monumental work reaches the passerines. Originally planned for four volumes, *Birds of Africa* has expanded with each issue. The average length of a species account is now 1000 words and there will be three more volumes before the task is completed. This one covers broadbills, pittas, larks, swallows, pipits, wagtails, cuckoo-shrikes, bulbuls and the smaller thrushes, but for reasons of space true thrushes *Turdus* and their allies are held over until Volume 5.

Readers of previous volumes will know the format. Besides the three editors, ten authors have contributed the species accounts, but in the interests of uniformity individual enthusiasms are not allowed much scope, and at times one longs for those enlightening remarks on "jizz" that can add such helpful touches: for instance, no mention is made of the Slender-billed *Andropadus gracilirostris* and Golden *Calypocichla serina* Bulbuls' habit of sitting for long periods in an upright position calling at the very top of the canopy, thus distinguishing them immediately from all other bulbuls.

The 32 plates are again by Martin Woodcock, and his skill is such that even those plates with large numbers of birds depicted, such as swallows, do not appear cluttered. Particularly pleasing are the small chats and wheatears, the *Phyllastrephus* Plate 19 is masterly, and one whole plate is reserved for juvenile robins. Less happy are some of the deep forest bulbuls which the painter has clearly not seen in life. I find the Golden Bulbul (Plate 21) almost unrecognizable and neither illustration nor text details the bare skin at the eye of Green-tailed Bristlebill *Bleda eximia*. Sometimes size can be misleading: in life the Rufous-rumped Lark *Pinarocorys erythropygia* is distinctly larger than Rufous-naped Lark *Mirafraga africana*; on Plate 3 it appears tiny in comparison. Similarly on Plate 27 the rather large Black Scrub-Robin *Cercotrichas podobe*, partly through the perspective, looks smaller than the small Forest Scrub-Robin *C. leucosticta*. Apropos size, it seems a pity that in the descriptions a rough overall length is not given. However old-fashioned this may be, it does give the reader a general idea of the bird.

I heartily endorse some taxonomic decisions. *Nicator* *Nicator chloris* goes back to the shrikes. In the field it never had affinities with the bulbuls. Similarly at the generic level, the Leaf-love returns as *Pyrrhurus scandens* after its flirtation with *Phyllastrephus*, to the other west African members of which it was distinctly odd man out. On English names, however, I deeply regret that the seal of approval is given to "greenbul", a bastardised coinage from "bulbul" with no etymological justification. The French, with more sense of language, stick to bulbul throughout.

For the field worker, three of the more difficult passerine groups are included: larks, pipits and bulbuls. In West Africa, except along the borders of the Sahara, the first two present few of the problems of eastern or southern Africa, but bulbuls are a West African family *par excellence*, hitherto atrociously illustrated, while authors have tended to surrender, particularly over *Andropadus*, with phrases like "hardly identifiable in the field". No book can include everything, but this volume goes a long way to making *Andropadus* identification simple and pays useful attention to calls, though I wonder how helpful to most readers is the remark *re* Ansorge's Greenbul *A. ansorgei* "reminiscent of flight call of Brown-headed Cowbird".

Although one can hardly carry these volumes in one's luggage on a trip to Africa, yet time spent studying species likely to be encountered will make a tremendous difference. May it not be too long before we get our hands on the cisticolas.

G.D. Field