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**Société d'Ornithologie de l'Ouest**  
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be considered rather irrelevant to the stated purpose) and lengthy species lists. The bird lists are a little odd, including many common species (rendering it difficult to get at the conservation value) and non-wetland ones. There is some attempt to identify critical species in the country and wetland accounts, although full species lists are not repeated in these accounts; this is probably justifiable as there would otherwise be unnecessary repetition, but many of the fauna and flora sections in country accounts are still too brief, e.g. the importance of Guinea-Bissau for Palaearctic waders is acknowledged by half a sentence, and Banc d'Arguin's birds get only three sentences. Each country chapter has topography and climate sections (the latter seeming unnecessarily detailed) and a list of wetlands, then individual wetland descriptions include location, area, altitude, hydrology, biology, human impact and conservation status. Referencing is incomplete, although some key works are cited in the text.

A few little shortcomings suggest that the book was finalised in a hurry. The fauna sections in the regional introductions have occasional statements referring to countries not in that region, suggesting that the decision on how to group countries was changed at a late stage. In one introduction, many birds are referred to as "E only", with no indication of what that means (not east, nor Europe). The coverage of wetlands seems comprehensive, but many of those discussed are not mapped, although they could easily have been. Also, the maps often have names displaced or repeated in additional places.

Despite these quibbles, there are apparently few errors of fact and the book is definitely more readable than most WCMC publications. It is an indispensable source of reference on African wetlands.

Alan & Hilary Tye

**Checklist of Birds of the Afrotropical and Malagasy Regions. Volume 1. Species limits and distribution.** By R.J. Dowsett & A.D. Forbes-Watson, 1993. 374 pp. Tauraco Press, Liège. ISBN 2-87225-000-X.

**A Contribution to the Distribution and Taxonomy of Afrotropical and Malagasy Birds.** Ed. by R.J. Dowsett & F. Dowsett-Lemaire, 1993. 389 pp. Tauraco Research Report 5, Tauraco Press, Liège. ISBN 2-87225-010-X.

Paperbacks, £15 each incl. airmail postage, from Aves a.s.b.l., Maison de l'Environnement, Rue de la Régence 36, B-4000 Liège, Belgium.

These two important works (along with a promised Volume 2) are destined to replace White (1960-65) as the commonly-used basis for Afrotropical bird taxonomy. In this

they will be competing with *The Birds of Africa* (Brown *et al.* 1982, Urban *et al.* 1986, Fry *et al.* 1988, Keith *et al.* 1992, *et seq.*) but happily the two treatments largely coincide. The stated intention of the *Checklist* is to up-date White's work and, for Madagascar, that of Sclater (1924-30). All off-shore islands are included, although the South Atlantic and Prince Edward groups are treated in a separate section, as not being truly Afrotropical.

The *Checklist* is in two parts: a systematic list (86 pp.) and country distribution tables (173 pp.), with indices to English, French and scientific names. The systematic list includes, for each species, a selective synonymy (a complete one is to be in Volume 2), key taxonomic references, alternative generic attributions, and subspecies which are sometimes regarded as full species. Each species is provided with selected references to the standard literature (*e.g.* *Birds of Africa*, Hayman *et al.* 1986, Serle & Morel 1977) for colour illustrations, where possible, and to selected published vocal recordings. The species are numbered according to a new adaptable system, permitting ordering and sorting of databases.

The vernacular names included reflect local usage within Africa and, thankfully, no attempt to standardise is made, as this is the function of scientific names. A further sensible decision is to include regional qualifiers (European, African *etc.*) only where necessary to distinguish between species found together. Good sense is also shown with regard to the use of hyphens and apostrophes. In all, this is the best treatment of vernacular names to appear in years.

The family sequence adopted is conventional, largely following Voous (1977), Hall & Moreau (1970), Snow (1978) and *Birds of Africa*, but not Sibley & Monroe (1990), which is considered still too controversial. The approach to superspecies employed is, however, stricter than that of most previous authors.

To check the list's accuracy and assess its opinions, I examined three groups: wheatears *Oenanthe* and relatives, *Cisticola* spp., and Gulf of Guinea endemics.

The treatment of wheatears is non-committal, with few superspecies. "*Oenanthe*" *bifasciata* is retained therein, despite the arguments of Tye (1988, 1989a, b) and Clancey (1990), all of which are ignored in the bibliography, although one is mentioned in the *Tauraco Research Report 5* ("TRR5"). The cisticolas are similarly treated conservatively, with no splits for *C. brunnescens/cinnamomea*, *lais/distinctus*, *aberrans/lemini* and others. Most of the cisticola decisions are adequately justified in TRR5, although the wheatear reasoning therein is less satisfactory.

Many of the Gulf of Guinea endemic species are suppressed (*e.g.* *Bostrychia bocagei*, *Treron sanctithomae*, *Dicrurus modestus*) although the more distinctive ones and others are accorded specific rank (*e.g.* *Otus hartlaubi*, *Zonavena thomensis*, the *Zosterops* spp., starlings and sunbirds). *Terpsiphone atrochalybeia* is recognised, but not *T. smithii*. A line has to be drawn somewhere, but any line is arbitrary and some decisions are puzzling (*e.g.* reverting to merging *Speirops lugubris* with *S. melanocephalus*). Endemics of conservation interest elsewhere in Africa are similarly suppressed. Most such decisions are scientifically reasonable, but

undesirable from a conservation standpoint.

The distribution tables forming the bulk of the *Checklist* are difficult to check without returning to original references; they have therefore to be taken at face value. The few species which I checked seem up-to-date, and the main use of the tables may be as a quick reference to discover whether one's records really are unusual. However, they will quickly become out-dated as faunistic knowledge increases.

TRR5 contains two papers, by one or both of the editors. First comes "Afrotropical avifaunas: annotated country checklists". These are, in fact, expanded versions of the tables in the *Checklist* and they completely obviate the need of the 67% of the *Checklist* that the latter occupy. It is a great shame that the two publications were not combined, with three sections in one volume – a systematic list, country tables and the second paper of TRR5. As issued, one needs the two separate publications, of different sizes (which will be a continual irritation to users, rendering their bookcases untidy or forcing a separation), and the bulk of the *Checklist* is rather a waste of paper. The extra detail in the tables of TRR5 consists in separating each country into its own table (several countries are combined in regional tables in the *Checklist*), slight up-dates over the *Checklist* (noted as such) and references for each species's status entry, mostly to published annotated lists for the country, and with explanatory footnotes where necessary. The references are up to 1993, with *Malimbus* appearing frequently; further substantial information was obtained from many correspondents. For countries which I know, the treatment appears generally meticulous and reliable. Rarity records are treated critically and reasons given for rejection or doubt.

The second paper, "Comments on the taxonomy of some Afrotropical bird species", gives the reasoning for all cases where the treatment of the *Checklist* diverges from White (1960-65) or Sclater (1924-30). The arguments are mostly sensible but individual workers will have their points of disagreement, especially if their work has been overlooked. The reasons given for the suppression of Gulf of Guinea species are often not very convincing and the authors did not request information from some recent visitors to the islands, regarding work in press and vocal recordings (deposited at the British Library of Wildlife Sounds) which would support some specific separations. Generally, the authors are "lumpers" and they place, occasionally, too much reliance on minor vocal characteristics to justify splits or mergers.

On a practical level, the quality of the bindings could have been better for works which will be much consulted: the cover of the TRR5 copy became half-detached on first reading. Of the few typographic errors noticed, only those relating to nomenclature are of importance e.g. *Agapornus* (*Checklist*), *Malacocichla* (TRR5).

In summary, these publications are the most thoughtful and comprehensive treatment of Afrotropical bird taxonomy and nomenclature to have appeared since their acknowledged antecedents, and they thoroughly deserve to become the systematic basis for Afrotropical ornithology in the future.

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