Suffolk has long been recognised as one of the richest and most diverse of the English counties. It is home to perhaps the broadest spectrum of breeding birds (in England), while the winter months bring internationally important numbers of wintering waterfowl and raptors to its coastal wetlands and inland marshes. Consequently, Suffolk’s ornithology has been well documented by previous authors, including Ticehurst (1932) and Payn (1973, 1978). Their detailed accounts of the birdlife during their respective periods make fascinating reading, but for the current generation of birders, these older accounts relate to a bygone era – one now lost to the demands of industrial agriculture and to the urban sprawl so prevalent during the last 30 years. The time is ripe for an update and this book meets all expectations.

Indeed, this book establishes a most-important milestone in Suffolk ornithology. Not only does it provide an updated review of all species recorded from Suffolk (in the case of some rarities, up to the end of 2002), but also forms the new baseline by which future changes can be monitored, and provides a valuable insight into developments which have occurred in the recent past.

Introductory chapters discuss Suffolk’s many and varied habitats, ranging from the coasts and estuaries, marshes and broads, to the Sandlings and Breckland, rivers, woodland and farmland. Many of the changes affecting the countryside since the account by Payn, ranging from the intensification of agriculture to the increase in reservoirs and gravel-pits, and their impact on bird populations are discussed. Further chapters consider the effects of weather and climate change. In particular, the emphasis that the impact of an occasional harsh winter has upon bird population levels is discussed, as are the weather conditions causing falls of migrants on the coast.

Other chapters deal with Suffolk’s ornithological history, noting particularly the enormous contribution made by C. B. Ticehurst. In addition to older material, the author has drawn upon the vast reservoir of information which has become available in the last 30 years, including published papers and accepted records which have not yet been accepted or await submission for assessment. Examples include some early reports of ‘Caspian Gull’ Larus cachinnans and an ‘American Herring Gull’ L. argentatus smithsonianus in the late 1990s, along with two Radde’s Warblers Phylloscopus schwarzi and a Dusky Warbler P. fuscatus reported in 2002. Their inclusion is doubtless due to the long gestation period of this book and the author’s enthusiasm to keep the text updated.

An attractive series of excellent vignettes are liberally scattered throughout the book, in addition to 32 pages of colour photographs, which show a range of important habitats, and a selection of both common and rare species photographed within the county.

The Birds of Suffolk nicely complements the recently published The Birds of Norfolk, providing many interesting comparisons and surprising contrasts. If you live in East Anglia, or regularly visit this region, then this book will be a treasure-trove of interesting facts and one which you will regularly want to delve into. A must-have for the bookshelf.

G. J. Jobson
THE BIRDS OF EXMOOR AND THE QUANTOCKS


Although Exmoor lies across two counties, it is surprising that this is the first major avifauna to cover all of it in one volume. The authors have also chosen to include the Quantocks and the Blackdown Hills, the other major uplands of the region. They claim, with some justification, that no other area of similar size in England and Wales contains such a variety of habitats. The introduction describes these habitats succinctly, and there are quite detailed maps of the topography and a gazetteer of principal sites.

A brief history of local ornithology, including ornithologists active since the mid nineteenth century is given. Almost nothing was published about the birds of the area until Cecil Smith’s Birds of Somersetshire, in 1869. For more recent records, the authors have drawn heavily on annual county bird reports, but have also consulted a wide range of other published sources (fully referenced).

The bulk of the book consists of the species accounts, which vary from a single sentence for accidental to two pages for Grey Heron Ardea cinerea. Records up to the end of 2000 are included. Each account is prefaced by a description of the species’ past and present status, and arrival and departure dates of migrants are recorded. The accounts are generally full, and cover distribution, timing of breeding, and numbers. The area has seen several local extinctions, notably of Red Lagopus lagopus and Black Grouse Tetrao tetrix, and Cirl Emberiza cirlus and Corn Buntings Miliaria calandra, while numbers of Ring Ouzels Turdus torquatus are at a low ebb. Merlins Falco columbarius continue to hold on, however, while Dartford Warbler Sylvia undata is a notable gain.

The book ends with records of exotics and escapes, and a list of rejected records. The illustrations, by local artists, are of birds in local settings. I found that of Black Grouse at their last Exmoor lek particularly evocative. This book contains a great deal of information and bears comparison with any other local avifauna of which I am familiar, and I recommend it to anyone with an interest in the area. It is available only from Isabelline Books, 8 Woodlane Crescent, Falmouth TR11 4QS; e-mail mikann@beakbook.demon.co.uk.

David Warden

THE ATLAS OF WINTERING BIRDS IN NORTHUMBRIA


If you put only one bird book on your Christmas list, make it this one. Northumberland & Tyneside Bird Club’s small band of field-workers have produced the first wintering atlas for a British county, and it is a worthy companion volume to the Atlas of Breeding Birds in Northumbria (Day, Hodgson & Rossiter 1995). Many county bird clubs have now produced breeding atlases, but a winter atlas is a quite different challenge. Breeding birds on territory stay in one place and can be logged during the long days of spring and summer. Mapping the distribution of bird species in the short winter days is subject to the vagaries of weather and food supply – and the birds move in response to both!

During the three winters of 1996/97 to 1998/99, more than 140 observers made regular two-hour visits to all 1,432 tetrads within the Club’s recording area – the county of Northumberland and the districts of Newcastle upon Tyne and North Tyneside. With over 500,000 ha of land and inshore waters, and 100 km of coastline, this is one of the largest ornithological recording areas in England, yet with a low density of observers. Northumberland is particularly important for wintering birds; for example, 2,700 ha of intertidal mudflats on Lindisfarne hold nationally and internationally important populations of waders and wildfowl, notably Svalbard pale-bellied Brent Geese Branta bernicla hrota, which peaked at 4,000 during the atlas fieldwork.

A total of 171 species winter regularly in the region, and the results of this tetrad atlas are compared with the national Winter Atlas (Lack 1986), compiled during 1981-84. There are familiar stories of declines among farmland birds such as Grey Partridge Perdix perdix between the two recording periods, but perhaps the greatest success story is the remarkable increase of Common Buzzards Buteo buteo, which occurred in 67% of 10-km squares compared with just 17% in 1981-84. The atlas quantifies populations of wintering birds and the top ten is dominated by immigrants from northern Europe. Wood Pigeon Columba palumbus at the top is followed by Common Starling Sturnus vulgaris, Rook Corvus frugilegus, Common Gull Larus canus, Eurasian Jackdaw C. monedula, Black-headed Gull L. ridibundus, Fieldfare Turdus pilaris, European Golden Plover Pluvialis apricaria, Northern Lapwing Vanellus vanellus and Common Chaffinch Fringilla coelebs.

This atlas is produced...
extremely professionally, with vignettes of all the wintering species. An invaluable acetate overlay, supplied with the book, maps all the river systems and major settlements in 'Northumbria'. Tetrad maps of all major habitat types are similarly useful, and photographs of key locations, many of them taken from the air, help the reader visualise the patchwork of upland moorland, lowland farmland and dramatic coastline which makes this region so attractive to wintering birds.

The authors and fieldworkers should be congratulated for this substantial achievement. The atlas is available, post free, from Mike Hodgson, 31 Uplands, Monkseaton, Whitley Bay, Tyne & Wear NE25 9AG.

Adrian Pitches

BIRDS, SCYTHES AND COMBINES: A HISTORY OF BIRDS AND AGRICULTURAL CHANGE


If you want to know why so many of our farmland bird populations are in a parlous state, this is by far the most informative book available. The author approaches environmental history armed with a lifetime of experience as a working farmer in Sussex and Wales, and a long association with the scientific work of the BTO. In short, he knows what he is talking about, perhaps uniquely so. His aim is to survey the impact of 250 years of constant agricultural change on British farmland birds, under which definition the book includes 99 species with a combined population of over 91 million in the winter. The categories are perhaps a little too widely drawn (it is surprising to find Pintail Anas acuta and Garganey A. querqueedula on the list) but this hardly matters when a core 22 species account for over 80% of the breeding population in summer.

The book develops by outlining the course of agrarian change since the eighteenth-century enclosures, in arable and pastoral farming, including, eventually, such familiar themes as the use of pesticides, the removal of hedges and drainage of wet areas, the coming of mechanisation and the modernisation of buildings. The basic message is that in economic and social terms the countryside has been in a state of flux since 1750: there is no single ‘traditional farming system’ to go back to, but rather the past is a kaleidoscope of farming change driven by markets, technology and government policy. For birds, however, these changes tended broadly to cancel one another out until around 1970. Certainly there were losers with the early enclosures, the Great Bustard Otis tarda being the obvious example: in Sussex they were common enough to be censed with hounds before the great changes. But these were more than compensated for by the benefits from high organic inputs into Victorian farming, which encouraged species like Sky Lark Alauda arvensis and Corn Bunting Miliaria calandra. MacGillivray, in a Hebridean croft during the mid nineteenth century, had Corn Bunting’s eggs fried on a shovel for his tea. Every twist in the game produced winners and losers: species like Common Snipe Gallinago gallinago were losers when the main wetlands were drained, but gainers when agricultural depression after 1870 led to the neglect of farm drains and the spread of rusty fields. Linnets Carduelis cannabina lost out with the sweeping away of gorse Ulex and whins Genista on enclosure, but gained again as a result of the multiplication of hedges and weedy root crops. But nothing much fundamental happened to farmland birds as a whole until the second half of the twentieth century.

The most important single critical change was the development of pre-emergent herbicides from the mid 1960s, which within two decades radically altered the ecology of arable farmland and destroyed both the arable weed flora and the traditional rotation of crops. The way was now clear for autumn-sown monocultures, and the specialisation of farming away from the traditional mixed farm to a cereal east and pastoral west – always a tendency but now a confirmed division. Grassland management, meanwhile, became more intense, with heavy fertiliser applications and EU headage payments. The situation was exacerbated by mechanisation and the abolition of the old stack yards, which had immemorially provided so much winter feed.

Shrubb writes with clarity (not always helped by his publisher’s layout of maps). His argument is concentrated and the detail intense, if also intensely interesting. Who would have guessed, for example, that the fate of the Montagu’s Harrier Circus pygargus in the Norfolk Broads was sealed by the coming of the London taxi and the bus, vehicles which did not need the specialist crop of marsh hay that had formerly been sold to fuel the capital’s transport?

Not all is doom and gloom. We overcame the loathsome habits of Victorian collecting, though we have not (at least in Scotland) abjured raptor persecution. We largely overcame the use of organochlorines and organophosphates which menaced the bird population in the late 1950s and early 1960s. On the other hand, the message of this book is that the current crisis will not so quickly go away. The organochlorines poisoned people as well as Peregrine Falcons Falco peregrinus, so there was a wider social reason to ban them. No-one is going to ban pre-
emergent herbicides or black-bag silage just for the sake of the birds, nor should they try. The EU might eventually back away from hedgerow payment for sheep on the hills; that would help, but it would not put the clock back. Indeed, the message of this book is that the clock never can be put back, even if we know to which point in history we wanted to turn it. Paying farmers for feeding birds in winter might do something: encouraging headlands and beetle banks by public subsidy might do even more. But the old rotational farming and the mixed farms which for centuries, even more centuries that Michael Shrubbs deals with, supported our farmland birds are gone forever.

The format is fairly straightforward. A few pages of introductory material, entitled ‘What is a bird?’, give a brief overview of avian evolution, structure and anatomy, and breeding systems. Then it is straight into the main part of the book: a review of all 200 avian families, with coverage ranging from a single page for small groups such as frogmouths (Podargidae), through to six pages for gulls (Laridae), ten for owls (Strigidae), formulate (and rightly so: it’s a little cracker!) and swans (Anatidae). There are standard sections on structure, distribution, food, breeding biology, and an especially useful one on conservation, but these are used cleverly to highlight interesting aspects of biology or adaptation relevant to a particular group.

An attractive feature is the inclusion of short (two-page) sections headed ‘Photo Story’ and ‘Special Features’. The former take a series of photos which show, for example, an Osprey Pandion haliaetus catching a fish, male Ruffs Philomachus pugnax displaying at a lek, and (my favourite) Kakapos Strigops habroptilus in captivity. The ‘Photo Story’ sections show important aspects of behaviour, ecology, etc. in stunning detail, with a commentary text from people who really do know what they are talking about. ‘Special Features’ are varied and, for example, include reports on Great Tit Parus major population biology, why an owl looks like an owl, and pigeon (Columbidae) navigation. These are excellent and authoritative, presenting serious science in an accessible and readable way.

So, this book is more than just a series of glossy pictures of pretty birds. The single-volume format cannot compete with the detail of the Handbook of the Birds of the World, and many topics are necessarily brief, especially the ‘Factfile’, a small box for each family which includes the number of species, their global distribution, habitat, plumage, voice, nest, eggs, diet and conservation status, and, bizarrely, an illustration of size against a human silhouette (imagine the Goldcrest Regulus regulus, about the size of a big toe!). Who should buy it? It is probably not for ‘serious birders’, but if you know someone who is ‘into birds’, then you could do a lot worse than give them this for Christmas. My advice is to leave plenty of time to buy them something else in case you decide to keep it!

Finally, Chris, Don Merton (page 310) is not examining a fledgling Kakapo, he’s cuddling it; and rightly so: it’s a little cracker!

David T. Parkin
Learn the meaning of the phrase Birds of a Feather Flock Together, its origin, plus see examples of how it can be used in a sentence. Now, a few times every week, they all meet up and exercise as a group. Thus, as the saying goes, birds of a feather flock together. In other words, Ed and his friends enjoy doing similar things together, like going to the gym. Synonyms / Related Phrases: two peas in a pod. A large flock of birds. Where are they going? The Origin of “Birds of a Feather Flock Together”. The phrase “birds of a feather flock together” is at least over 470 years old, as it goes back to the mid-16th century. William Turner is said to have used a version of this expression in the Rescuing of Romish Fox, from the year Suffolk Wildlife Trust (SWT) describes itself as the county’s "nature charity the only organisation dedicated wholly to safeguarding Suffolk's wildlife and countryside." It is a registered charity, and its headquarters is at Brooke House in Ashbocking, near Ipswich. It was founded in 1961, and is one of 47 wildlife trusts covering the Great Britain and Northern Ireland. As of March 2017, it has 13,200 members, and it manages 3,120 hectares (7,700 acres) of land in 60 nature reserves, most of which Suffolk Bird Group (SBG) is the group for people interested in the birds of Suffolk, and provides a network and a voice for birdwatchers in the county. The group is administered by Suffolk birdwatchers for Suffolk birdwatchers, keeping them in touch with what is going on and with each other. Through the group’s Council, SBG has links with other naturalist and conservation organisations in the region. Suffolk Bird Group Annual Bird Report 2009. SBG organises and promotes surveys and projects on the birds of Suffolk, with an opportunity for members to participate. SBG is also able to support worthwhile projects through bursaries. Membership of SBG is open to anyone with an interest in the birds of Suffolk. Please visit our website: https://www.suffolkbirdgroup.org/.