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BOOK REVIEW

Field Guide to Tasmanian Birds

Dave Watts, October 1999. New Holland Publishers Pty Ltd, Australia. RRP \$29.95

Dave Watts' 'Field Guide to Tasmanian Birds' is a concise, much needed handbook specific to the birds of the Island State. Its publication is certainly justified, for as Sally Bryant states in the book's introduction, 'Few locations in the world offer over 220 species of resident or regular visitor, including 12 endemic species, all within two to three hours travel of a major centre and nestled among breathtaking wilderness and world heritage scenery.' Each species has a separate page devoted to it, with the usual brief text covering 'identification, habits, habitat, breeding, distribution', and finally, a 'where to see' section. Surprisingly, this last crucial piece of information has been omitted for some species which in unfortunate, particularly for those birders who may be just visiting Tasmania on a short trip. There is however, a clear distribution map given for each species.

Paradoxically, I feel the magnificent accompanying photographs are both the book's great strength and yet weakness at the same time. Dave Watts' bird photographs are exceptional, although it should be pointed out that over 60 images included here are by other similarly talented photographers who perhaps could have received a little more acknowledgment for their work rather than simply the Photo Credits *en masse*. The stunning images are what really makes this book, yet to describe it as a field guide is debateable. A field guide surely should contain an accurate, visual depiction of plumage variations for each species covered, particularly with regard to the bird's sex or adult/immature status. They should also clearly show the entire bird, and in a manner that enables the guide's user to differentiate between similar species. These necessities become obvious when 'in the field', and for this reason I think the Slater or Simpson and Day style field guides

are still way ahead in practical terms compared to photographic guides. For example, the Australian Owlet-nightjar photograph is stunning, and certainly typical of how it may be seen secreting itself in the wild, but it provides little indication to a novice birdwatcher as to what the whole bird actually looks like.

The layout is clear and uniform throughout, and an interesting attempt has been made to simplify the book's use by colour coding the top corner of each page, each colour representing a specific group of birds. In reality, unless you can quickly recall which colour relates to which group (there are 7) then it is unnecessary. Perhaps if the publishers has printed a key to these groups on the cover then the code would be far more speed efficient.

Overall, a 'Field Guide to Tasmanian Birds' is an attractive, worthwhile addition to Australian bird literature and its succinct format should appeal to a broad range of readers. For serious birdswatchers, however, it should be seen as a useful accompaniment to the "traditional" field guides, rather than as a replacement.

Steve Treddinck
2 Scenic Crescent
Mt Riverview
New South Wales 2774