

on islands – are endangered by being naturally limited to a small area and hence having small populations.

The main text is divided into 20 chapters each of which takes a single species (occasionally two or three) and examines the reasons for its scarcity. Some of these species were chosen because they typify similar situations faced by other species. For example, the Royal Cinclodes *Cinclodes aricomae* lives in the high-altitude *Polylepis* woodlands in the Andes, forests that are disappearing at an alarming rate; but it is not only the Royal Cinclodes that is threatened by their loss, many other species are found only in these or similar montane forests. The 20 chapters are divided into four sections, each with an introductory chapter. The sections are headed: 'The distribution and causes of rarity', 'Rarity and extinctions on islands', 'Saving the world's rarest birds' and 'The lost and the found'.

These chapters give a good account of how varied are the pressures faced by endangered birds. Threats from introduced predators loom large, but these are not just the usual rats and cats. The Brown Tree Snake *Boiga irregularis* has exterminated several small forest birds on Guam, the House Mouse *Mus musculus* eats nestling albatrosses (Diomedidae) on Gough Island and the blood-sucking larvae of an introduced fly *Philornis downsi* is devastating the population of the Medium Tree Finch *Camarhynchus pauper*, a Darwin's finch which occurs only on Floreana in the Galapagos.

It is now well known what effects agricultural chemicals such as DDT have on birds of prey. Less well known perhaps is the precipitous decline in three Asian vultures (*Gyps bengalensis*, *Gyps indicus* and *Gyps tenuirostris*). These species play an important role in the ecology of many Asian countries and until recently occurred in enormous numbers, but the widespread use in veterinary medicine of the anti-inflammatory drug diclofenac, to which the vultures are exceedingly sensitive, has led to their populations being reduced to less than 1% of their former numbers within little more than a decade. The three species may only be rescued by maintaining them with captive breeding programmes until the situation in the wild can be resolved.

Captive breeding to increase numbers is a useful tool, although the problems which caused the species' decline in the wild must, of course, be sorted if successful reintroductions are to be achieved. A number of species including some curassows (Cracidae) and parrots (Psittacidae) are now listed as extinct in the wild and exist only in collections. Although many of the people holding individuals of these species are trying hard to increase their numbers, other species could almost certainly be better managed if the owners of the birds were less possessive (large sums of money are sometimes involved). The account of the Spix's Macaw *Cyanopsitta spixii* does not increase one's faith in human nature.

Just as the causes of decline tend to be species-specific, so do the solutions, and this book outlines the great lengths to which people go to achieve success. Perhaps outstanding is the case of the Kakapo *Strigops habroptila*, the world's largest parrot. This bizarre New Zealand bird is flightless, nocturnal, the males display from leks (bowl-like depressions in the ground) and the females may only breed once in 7 years; given good conditions, they may be very long-lived. It is also confiding and approachable. It was heavily hunted by Maoris, who used the skins in cloaks, but it survived this only to be brought close to extinction in the 19th century, largely by habitat loss and the introduction of mammalian predators (though the decline of this once-common bird was helped by the Victorian craze for stuffed specimens which kept the collectors busy – and wealthy – for decades). As predators seem virtually impossible to eliminate, the solution has been to move the remaining birds to offshore islands which are largely free of the predators (some have rats) – a strategy used successfully for several endangered New Zealand birds. There is some scope for optimism, the numbers of Kakapo are now increasing, albeit rather slowly, but the lengths to which their protectors have gone to ensure an increased breeding success is daunting.

Each chapter is an adventure in itself and overall the book is not only a worthwhile read, but a good source of information for years to come. It is packed with detail, well referenced (some 1200 references are listed) and up to date. Sombre, but inspiring.

Christopher Perrins

GUALLAR, S., SANTANA, E., CONTRERAS, S., VERDUGO, H. & GALLÉS, A. **Paseriformes del Occidente de México: Morfometría, Datación y Sexado. (Monografies no.5 del Museu de Ciències Naturals any 2009.)** 488 pages, numerous black-and-white figures (including photographs) and tables. Barcelona: Institut de Cultura de Barcelona, Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2009. Paperback, ISSN 1695-8950. Price not known, but can be downloaded for free from: http://w3.bcn.es/V01/Serveis/Noticies/V01NoticiesLlistatNoticiesCtl/0,2138,418159056_418914204_2_1264006434,00.html?accio=detall&home=.

When I started studying the population ecology of Neotropical birds in Mexico 15 years ago, I spent most of my energy trying to gain the knowledge and ability required to determine the age- and sex-classes of most bird species. If the species was not described in Peter Pyle's *Identification Guide to North American Birds* (1997), it was impossible to be sure of its age. It took me three years of fieldwork to be able to determine the age of most of the birds I was catching. In those days, I would have given my eye teeth to have in my hands a

copy of this book, which is entirely in Spanish and represents a great achievement in the study of Mexican birds. It fills a huge void that exists in Neotropical ornithology by summarizing decades of study and including detailed descriptions of the life cycles, moult patterns, morphology, morphometrics and ageing criteria for 76 resident and migratory species of western Mexico, an area with high bird diversity. For most of the species presented in the book, particularly for endemics, among which are Dwarf Vireo *Vireo nelsoni*, Happy Wren *Thryothorus felix*, Russet Nightingale-Thrush *Catharus occidentalis* and several members of the family Emberizidae, this is the first time that such information is available, making this publication an essential resource for ornithologists, ecologists and bird-ringers working in the northern part of the Neotropics.

The book comprises three sections, the first being an introduction to the characteristics of the study area (western Mexico) and the methodology used. Included in the second section are general results, describing morphology, morphometrics, moult and ageing data for the region's avifauna. This section presents interesting discussions on the ecology of the species and about the differences that exist between resident and migratory birds. The final and largest section contains individual accounts of 76 species, among them 23 in the family Parulidae (mostly winter visitors) and nine New World sparrows (Emberizidae), all resident except Lincoln's Sparrow *Melospiza lincolni*. Unlike other books on American birds, this guide describes the characteristics of the different age- and sex-classes by narrating the life cycles of each species and describing how the birds change through their lives. Clear diagrams show both the annual cycles and the different moults each species undergoes during all the stages of its life cycle.

At a time when natural history studies have declined in importance and descriptive studies are rarely published, this book represents an oasis of basic information that can be applied for ecological, evolutionary and conservation studies of Neotropical birds. It is worth mentioning that *Paseriformes del Occidente de México* is the result of collaboration between ornithologists from both sides of the Atlantic, representing one of the few studies that link ideas and working techniques between America and Europe, allowing the convergence of knowledge in research areas (ageing and moult) that have evolved independently in these two continents.

My one criticism is that the printed version includes only black-and-white photographs. This makes it difficult to appreciate the descriptions of different plumage colours and patterns presented in the figure legends and the text. However, colour photographs are included in an electronic version (for details, see above).

I hope that this book will promote more studies of other Neotropical species, and the publication of similar guides in the near future. Without this type of informa-

tion, it will be very hard to understand and protect the rich avifauna of Mexico and other tropical countries of America – an avifauna that is today facing a large number of conservation problems.

Jorge E. Schondube

ISENMANN, P., BENMERGUI, M., BROWNE, P., BA, A.D., DIAGANA, C.H., DIAWARA, Y. & EL ABIDINE OULD SIDATY, Z. **Oiseaux de Mauritanie – Birds of Mauritania**. 408 pages, numerous colour plates (photographs), 3 colour figures, tables, line drawings. Paris: Société d'Etudes Ornithologiques de France, 2010. Paperback, €38.00 (+ postage) from S.E.O.F. Bibliothèque, Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Case Postale 51, 55 rue Buffon, 75231 Paris Cedex 05, France (seof@mnhn.fr), ISBN 2-916802-02-9.

This important work is a continuation of the senior author's welcome documentation of the avifaunas of northwestern Africa (Algeria: Isenmann & Moali 2000, reviewed in *Ibis* 144: 166; Tunisia: Isenmann *et al.* 2005, see *Ibis* 148: 185). All are francophone countries, and the text is usefully in both French and English. Only occasionally is there a significant difference between the two, parallel, texts here (e.g. under Dideric Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx caprius*, a young cuckoo fed by a Yellow-bellied Eremomela *Eremomela icteropygialis* is said to be 'plus probablement' Klaas's Cuckoo *C. klaas* but in English just 'possibly', which is surely incorrect).

Sixty-one pages of introduction deal thoroughly with the physical environment, history of exploration, biogeography (particularly the interface between the Palaearctic and Afrotropical avifaunas) and migration (stressing the international importance of the Banc d'Arguin). There are beautiful habitat photographs and three maps, essential for interpreting the text. The systematic list of 303 pages details the status of each species, with localities, dates of migration and reproduction. A status abbreviation is given, but for an explanation one must go to page 384, the complete country list. Taxonomic discussion is well informed, although documentation of breeding *Acrocephalus* warblers ought to have mentioned molecular and other evidence for *baeticatus* being conspecific with the European Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* (Parkin *et al.* (2004) *Br. Birds* 97: 276–299). Unlike the books on Algeria and Tunisia, there are no species maps, in view of the limited field surveys possible in this large and politically difficult country. Road counts mentioned for some species show changes in abundance observed at various degrees of latitude, but without details of methodology it is not clear to what extent factors such as seasonality were taken into account.

There is much new information, for example detailing the incursion of Afrotropical breeding species from