

Book reviews

Publishers and Authors are invited to submit a copy of their books for a review in the journal. Books are to be sent to the Deputy Editor-in-chief of Avocetta (Dr. Michelangelo Morganti - CNR-IRSA Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Istituto di ricerca sulle acque - Via del Mulino 19, 20861 Brugherio - MB)


An unmissable trip: All the birds of the world

Surfing the waves of evolution, across oceans and continents in a wonderful world tour. This is the sensation that pervade the lucky readers of this majestic book. Big and heavy as an old-fashioned encyclopaedia but at the same time fresh, modern, and rich of multimedia contents as only a few books can do. The most recent son of the 'Handbook' family is a sort of compendium of the lifelong work of Josep del Hoyo. Nowadays, del Hoyo is a claimed ornithologist, known in all the world for its pivotal work: the 'Handbook of the birds of the world'. In the '80s, Josep was only a dreamer. As a young bird-enthusiast and formidable traveller, during his explorations of Africa he found himself in the urge of a good bird guide for those remote regions. Then, he conceived the idea of writing a book including all the birds of the world (I like to imagine that this occurred while driving his 4x4 on a Sahelian road). Everybody around him told that no editors could have ever sustained such an ambitious project. So far, he founded in 1989 its own editor for this purpose, the Lynx edicions (Barcelona). 'It's impossible to fit all the bird species in a single book, some other observed. It took decades and a superb effort by both scientists and artists from all over the world, but the Josep's dream was eventually realized. In the preface of the book, the same author goes through this fascinating and inspiring story, do not miss it! For those that have the entire printed Handbook in their library, 'All the birds of the world' may be used as an ideal graphic

index of the encyclopaedia. For those that do not have it, this is a self-standing opera, that could be accessed at a multiple level. With more than 10,000 top-quality illustrations organized in dense tables - each of one can be exposed as a good art piece in your resting room - this can be certainly considered an artwork. But 'All the birds of the world' is, primarily, a science book. Each of the species is accompanied by an updated map showing the breeding, wintering, and migratory ranges. For each of the taxon, an intuitive chart shows whether it is considered as a full species or not, accordingly to the four main bird classification systems. This is accompanied by the conservation status. Eventually, for each species a QR code easily connects you to the related page in the 'HBW Alive' (birdsoftheworld.org), the up-to-date online version of the Handbook, whose contents are accessible through a different subscription fee. In the core section, one can see in a glance all the 11,542 known species of birds grouped in families. The reader will be delighted to discover that almost 130 species of kingfishers populate the globe or to contemplate the astonishing colours of the South American manakins while also looking at their confined and tiny ranges. Expert birders may be entertained from the subtle differences among the plumages of the tens of *Anthus* species. Sadly, but rigorously, a specific appendix is dedicated to extinct species, with former ranges and extinction dates. Here, the reader can feel the huge loss in biodiversity that human inflicted to nature. A further appendix hosts an atlas, where the reader can explore the different biogeographic regions and

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easily link the species to their geographic pertinence thanks to a series of intuitive country codes, listed in alphabetical order in the bookmark. Overall, this book offers in a glance a complete view of the world's bird diversity and distribution, while making easier to access species-specific detailed info on each species. Wonderful to contemplate but also excellent for study purposes, this book is certainly a fundamental piece of the library of any birder, ornithologist, and nature lover in general.

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Reference

Del Hoyo J. ed., 2020 All the birds of the world. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona. € 85.00

The book can be ordered directly from the publisher, Lynx Edicions: <https://www.lynxeds.com/product/all-the-birds-of-the-world/>

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The charm of the night: an illustrated book on barn owls and the like

In the last years, we have seen the scientific ornithological literature flourishing with books showing that scientific communication must not be necessarily boring, as they are able to present sound scientific data in a fresh and easy-to-read language. The book on the kestrel presented in the last number of *Avocetta* is one of them, and the book on the barn owls by Alexandre Roulin is even rising the standards of modern ornithological monographs. In twelve chapters, Prof. Roulin – a world authority on Barn Owls – is able to condensate all his knowledge on this group of birds, spanning from evolution of this complex of species to the genetic of the different colour morphs that can be observed even within the siblings of a single brood.

The plural “barn owls” in the title indicate that this book is not on one species only. Despite most information is on the western barn owl *Tyto alba* – the species living in Europe – the book presents the whole barn owl species complex and the other members of the Tytonidae family (grass owls, masked owls and sooty owls) – a comprehensive view that will make all barn owls lovers happy.

Conservation is given large relevance, as indicated by the fact that is presented in chapter 2 – just after the introduction – and presents practical actions, like details on how to build and position a nest box, beside all the passion of the author puts to change the common view on this species that, regrettably, is still persecuted because it is believed to be harbinger of bad luck in many parts of the world.

Another part I found fascinating is that on sibling negotiation. Between one visit of parents to the nest to deliver food and the other, barn owl siblings vocally interact, communicating each other their level of hunger and therefore their willingness to fight for the next prey delivered by parents. Being informed about each other’s need for food, barn owl nestlings are able to fine-tune their behaviour, with satiated siblings that withdraw from competition

and let their hungry siblings eat the next indivisible prey item brought by parents without competing too much. This behaviour is well-known, with hundreds of scientific papers published so far on this and other species, and is condensed here in slightly more than four pages, fully understandable also for a non-academic reader. And if you want a pictorial summary of the topic, you just need to look the picture on page 205.

Artworks of this book merit a special mention. The drawings and painting by Laurent Willenegger are real masterpieces not only because they are wonderful, but also because they are also really effective in explaining at a glance even the most complex concepts. For instance, the chapter on colour polymorphism – another topic that has been widely investigated in the scientific literature – is able to present even the most complex concepts clearly also thanks to the drawings and the graphs that enrich this and the other chapters of this book. And if you cannot believe that sonograms can be art, please have a look at page 108! Almost any page of this book has a figure that complements the text, which makes this an illustrated book on barn owls. And we cannot forget the carefully crafted graphics that characterizes all the pages giving to this book a unique stile – just say that orange, the colour of the barn owl, is dominant all over. After reading this book, you will not resist the temptation to spend one night in the field observing for barn owls and their behaviour.

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Reference

Roulin A., 2020. Barn owls: evolution and ecology. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK. 297 p.

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