

Book reviews

A Guide to the Birds of Nepal

Carol and Tim Inskipp

Croom Helm, Beckenham, Kent, UK, 392 pp, £25

It is a deplorable habit among ornithological reviewers to pick out minor inaccuracies in bird books in an effort to show that they are far more knowledgeable than the authors and should have been asked to write the book in the first place. There is, thank heaven, no need for such nit-picking here. The Inskippes have done a remarkable job in pulling together a huge amount of material (much of it unpublished) to form a summary of the present status and distribution of the birds of this remarkably beautiful country. It could be argued that their efforts are premature, for huge areas of Nepal remain relatively unexplored, but far too much research is never published and far too many good books are postponed or put off for ever. No. The result of their efforts will form a basis for the continued exploration of this still decidedly underworked land.

So much for the good news. By adding bits and bobs, such as a *Where to Watch* guide and a *Field Guide* section (but only to 'difficult birds'), the book has become something of a rag bag. Additionally, the whole text looks as if it has been knocked out on my old portable typewriter and flows from section to section without a break. Book design is an art. In its presentation and production this book is artless and, presumably, lacks a designer. The result is one of the most awkward books to use I have encountered. A single example will suffice.

Try to find slender-billed warbler. Start at the Index, which covers over seven pages, each divided into four columns in the smallest typeface I have ever seen. With considerable eyestrain one realizes that the Index is of scientific names. Thumb forward and there are English names—bingo! . . . '74, 279, P14'. Page 74 covers identification. On to page 279 where we find that its status is a vagrant—a single record. On to P14. P14? There is no Plate 14. Right, try P14. We turn to Plate 4. There we find 14 numbered birds, but which is the slender-billed? Wait a minute . . . there was a List of Illustrations at the front. Off to page 6. There it is 'Plate 4 Phylloscopus Warblers with wingbars'. That's not much use. Fortunately opposite is page 7 with a 'Key to the Colour

Plates'. We look down and . . . oh dear, no slender-billed on Plate 4. But . . . there it is on Plate 5 . . . numbers 1 and 2. So we find our bird. Even without the Index mistake it would have been an ordeal.

Poor Carol, poor Tim—their efforts deserved better. There is no excuse for sloppy publishing—especially at £25 a throw.

John Gooders, author (whose New Where to Watch Birds is due to be published this month).

The Natural History of Otters

Paul Chanin

Croom Helm (in association with the Mammal Society), 1985, 179 pp, PB £7.95, HB £12.95

The Natural History of Otters is the first in a new series of mammal books for the general reader, produced in association with the Mammal Society. I hope those that follow are as good. This one has 179 pages of clearly presented information about the world's otters, not just *Lutra lutra*. This attempt at comprehensiveness works because there are only nine species, though the distinctiveness of the sea otter then becomes very evident from its separate treatment in several sections. Research on otters is reviewed in a helpful way, with not so much detail being given that general points become obscured, yet the treatment is certainly not superficial. Apart from defining exactly what an otter is and how it is adapted to being one, the book offers chapters on food and feeding behaviour, relations with other animals (including mink), social organization (including territoriality and pheromones) and life history. The chapter on otters and man, though predictable, is nevertheless interesting. It describes first how the otter was once regarded as a pest to be destroyed, then as a valued animal of the chase, and now it is strictly protected, rarely seen (even by the author himself!) and almost as legendary as the Loch Ness monster. This chapter also includes a review of otters and the fur trade (especially sea otters) and the need for conservation measures before the few species of Lutrinae become even fewer. There are 9 pages of useful bibliography, 17 colour plates (and an endearing front cover), plus 50 maps, graphs and line drawings to enhance the clear and neatly

Oryx Vol 20 No 2, April 1986