Reviews

Identification of European Non-Passerines
By Jeff Baker
BTO, 2016
Pbk, 464pp; many colour and black-and-white drawings
ISBN 978-1-908581-67-9; £15.00

For most ringers, there are two guides that live near-permanently within arm’s reach: ‘Svensson’ (Identification Guide to European Passerines, 1992) and ‘Baker’ (Identification Guide to European Non-Passerines, 1993). Both guides have stood the test of time but a lot has changed since they were published. Advances in knowledge and a number of key texts on certain difficult groups mean that a wealth of new material on ageing and sexing has come to light since the early 1990s. So, how does Identification of European Non-Passerines compare with Jeff Baker’s first guide, and how does it stand up against the other information currently available?

Despite the subtle difference in title, this is essentially an updated and expanded edition of the 1993 first edition. Indeed, the first thing you notice when picking up the book is that the new version is thicker, and in fact it has an extra 130 pages. Eighty of those are dedicated to waders, a group that didn’t feature in the first edition, since they were dealt with by Prater et al.’s 1977 Guide to the Identification & Ageing of Holarctic Waders. In my view, the Prater guide was at best confusing and at worst completely unusable, so I was interested to see how Baker had dealt with some of the more familiar waders. First impressions are good. Certainly, the fact that most illustrations are now in colour (in contrast to both 1993 edition and Prater et al.) is a great help. The figures for ageing a Common Snipe Gallinago gallinago, for example, are expanded upon from the Prater et al. guide and now bear a much closer resemblance to real life, as do those for Woodcock Scolopax rusticola – just two examples for species with which I am familiar.

The remainder of the additional pages are dedicated to species not covered by the 1993 edition, such as Little Egret Egretta garzetta and Rose-ringed Parakeet Psittacula krameri, and to small expansions here and there for existing species.

The target audience for this book is undoubtedly ringers and much of the information is aimed at in-hand use. However, with a little practice, much of the information can be transferred to the field, and in that respect this book will also be of interest to many birders who don’t have a ringing permit. Yet it is worth pausing for a moment to consider the book’s title, and the resulting consideration for any birders thinking about adding this book to their library. First, this book is not a field identification guide by any means. Separation of Lesser Black-backed Larus fuscus and Great Black-backed Gull Larus marinus relies on wing length; separation of Common Uria aalge from Brünnich’s Guillemot U. lomvia relies on bill length; and a useful trait for telling Great Northern Gavia immer and White-billed Diver G. adamsii apart is the number of tail feathers. The most interesting content for any field birder will lie in the ageing and sexing information.

Secondly, ‘European’ is perhaps stretching things slightly. While Svensson (1992) really does deal with all the species likely to be found in Europe, Baker’s Identification of European Non-Passerines has some gaping holes: Montagu’s Harrier Circus pygargus, Eurasian Scops Otus scops and Tengmalm’s Owls Aegolius funereus, Red-necked Nightjar Caprimulgus ruficollis, Pallid Swift Apus pallidus, European Roller Coracias garrulus, Black Dryocopus martius and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers Dendropicos medius – all species that can be encountered across much of Europe, and could well turn up in a travelling ringer’s mist-nest. Rather, this publication is British-focused. And with that in mind, this is a book that could give great worth to any keen birder who wants to delve deeper into the delights of ageing and sexing at a level that conventional field guides don’t allow.

The main challenger to this book is likely to be Demongin’s 2016 Identification Guide to Birds in the Hand (Brit. Birds 109: 553–554). ‘Demongin’ has the advantage that it covers many more species than Baker and in some cases in considerably more detail; but this extra detail comes at a cost. For me, there’s something of an information overload in Demongin; in contrast, Baker is an uncluttered, concise and easy-to-use guide. Data are laid out clearly, key features are easy to find, and ageing criteria are simple to work through in a logical order. This ease of use can make all the difference when you’re quickly scanning through an entry in the field. Baker and Demongin sit side by side in my ringing box but, as my default go-to reference for non-passerine ageing and sexing, Baker’s updated guide continues to be first choice.

Stephen Menzie
The biodiversity of oceanic islands has always attracted interest, especially from an evolutionary point of view. But with the exception of some flagship species, most aspects of natural history remain poorly understood, or accessible only through academic publications. This new book represents one of the best compilations of less well-known elements of the flora and fauna of the Canary Islands, describing invertebrates and ferns as well as the better-known birds and trees. The resulting package will appeal to amateur naturalists and professional biologists alike.

The book is divided by habitats, and the authors have included recommended routes to explore the island with that in mind. Both the habitat descriptions and the route selection clearly show the authors’ understanding of island ecology in general and of the Canary Islands in particular. Each section includes an overview of the impact of human management and exploitation of the various habitats. Well-chosen photographs enhance the text, while text boxes, often written by local experts, provide additional information.

This book takes a much-needed, holistic approach to the natural history of Tenerife, and it should hopefully stimulate a wider interest and awareness among visitors searching purely for island endemics (and perhaps those in search mainly of the beach and the sun). Let’s hope that the authors’ enthusiasm will result in similar treatment for the other islands.

Marcel Gil Velasco

Bird Ringing Station Manual
By Przemysław Busse and Włodzimierz Meissner
University of Gdansk, Poland/De Gruyter, 2015
Hbk, 211pp; 70 colour photographs, many diagrams

I was not aware of this book or the authors until I was given a copy as a gift. As I began to read it, it seemed as though it had been written with me in mind – an English ringer who has recently established a ringing station/observatory in Poland!

Clearly, this book has only a niche market. It describes itself as a manual based on some 50 years of ringing migratory birds, mostly in Poland, and the authors wish to share their accumulated knowledge. They bring together three studies, designed to provide solutions to unanswered questions regarding bird migration (and which the authors refer to as ‘the bird migration problem’). The first, ‘Operation Baltic’, is a major ringing study involving over 1.5 million passerines ringed in a number of Baltic countries. The second, ‘Kuling’, is a wader research group of some 30 years’ standing. The third project, ‘SEEN’ (SE European Bird Migration Network), is a migration network of international groups studying migration along the southeastern route from eastern Europe and western Asia into Africa.

These studies form the basis for the three main sections of the book: passerines, waders and general migration. The authors identified the main problem with international cooperation as the incompatibility of methods and local protocols, which hampered the exchange of, and the efficient use of, migration data, and highlight the standardisation of working practices as a way forward. British ringers, familiar with the BTO’s ringers manual, will find much overlap, but also some new material.

The only real criticism of the book is the standard of English; the errors of spelling and phraseology detract a little from the book’s enjoyment, but usually produce a smile. Net loops are referred to as ‘ears’, circlip pliers as ‘reverse pincers’ and apparently ringers ‘clench’ their rings when closing them. From the perspective of a British ringer, this book gives a slightly different view of some aspects of ringing which readers should find interesting.

Robert Skeates