

# The *BB/BTO* Best Bird Book of the Year 2017

**Abstract** *British Birds* and the British Trust for Ornithology announce the winner of the Award for Best Bird Book of the Year. All books reviewed in *BB*, *BTO News* and on the BTO website [www.bto.org](http://www.bto.org) during the year 2017 were eligible for consideration for this Award.

A total of 67 books were reviewed by *British Birds* and/or the BTO during the year, and a higher-than-average 30 books made the extended shortlist and were available to look at on the day of judging. Local/regional atlases and avifaunas were not considered as they are the subject of a separate award (the results of which will be published next month). As usual, there were six judges on the panel, three each to represent *BB* and the BTO.

There were no obvious 'blockbusters' this year although, as so often happens, the top book won by a comfortable margin in the end. The runners-up were more difficult to pin down and a wide selection of books

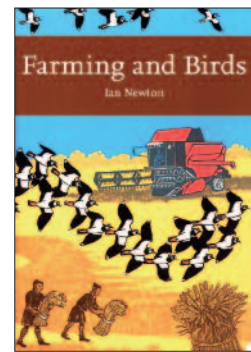
received at least one vote in the final analysis. Three titles were picked as the first or second choice by at least one judge and yet still failed to make it into the top six, highlighting the fact that an appreciation of good books can be a very personal thing.

It is always tricky to compare books that range from the academic and almost entirely text-based to those where photographs or artwork provide the primary interest. As it turned out, a high proportion of the highest-ranking titles this year gave roughly equal weight to images and text, part of a welcome trend encouraged by improvements in design and printing technology.

## Winner **Farming and Birds**

By Ian Newton; HarperCollins, 2017; reviewed in *BB* by Ian Carter (*Brit. Birds* 110: 685–686) and by Rob Fuller in *BTO News* (issue 325: 28)

One of these days Ian Newton might write a mediocre book, but 2017 was not destined to be the year it finally happened. This superb volume was first or second choice for four of the judges, all of whom were impressed by the clarity of the writing and the way that a difficult and complex subject has been made easily accessible to a wide audience. It is said that many books in the 'New Naturalist' series are bought by avid collectors who place them lovingly onto their shelves without a second glance at the contents. Hopefully some in that category will make an exception for this book since it is relevant to anyone with an interest in the way the countryside looks or the wildlife it supports. Its appearance is timely as we are in a period when there is much debate about the impacts of intensive farming on wildlife and how the current system of farm payments, greatly influenced by the EU, could be changed for the better. Ian Newton has won this award no fewer than three times before and this latest book adds to a body of work that is perhaps unsurpassed by any other author writing regularly about Britain's birds.



## 2nd= **The Cuckoo: the uninvited guest**

By Oldřich Mikulica, Tomáš Grim, Karl Schulze-Hagen and Bård G. Stokke; Wild Nature Press, 2017; reviewed in *BB* by Ian Carter (*Brit. Birds* 110: 181–182) and on the BTO website by Justin Walker

Although 2017 saw a larger than average group of books combining images and text, with roughly equal weight given to each, this book stood out as by far the best of its kind. The



William Skellorn

**64.** Ian Newton (right) receiving his award for Best Bird Book of the Year 2017 from Andy Clements at the BTO's headquarters in Thetford, January 2018.

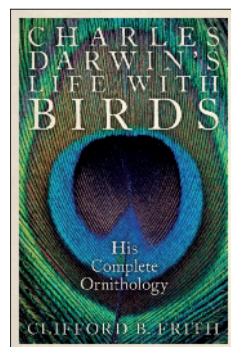
photographs are the work of Oldřich Mikulica and were taken mostly at a single site in the Czech Republic. He has won European awards for his photography and it is not hard to see why in this stunningly presented book. His co-authors have contributed a text that is lively and informative, helping to explain behaviours that are captured in such detail in the razor-sharp images. Karl Schulze-Hagen won this award in 2012 as a co-author of *The Reed Warblers*, a book commended for its beautiful design. This volume raises the bar for design and presentation even higher.



## **2nd= Charles Darwin's Life with Birds: his complete ornithology**

By Clifford B. Frith; Oxford University Press, 2016; reviewed on the BTO website by Ruth Walker

This is a more academic offering than the others in the top six and the only book that relies largely on words rather than images. It is no less appealing for that. It deals with all aspects of Charles Darwin's interest in birds, from his formative experiences as a young birdwatcher, through to observations that helped crystallise his new theories and changed the way we think about the world. It is meticulously researched and includes a 150-page appendix listing every ornithological reference made by Darwin in his published books and papers, encompassing hundreds of different species. It is a fascinating and enjoyable read.



## **4th Flight Lines: tracking the wonders of bird migration**

By Mike Toms; BTO, 2017; reviewed in *BB* by Stephen Menzie (*Brit. Birds* 110: 766) and by Sorrel Lyall in *BTO News* (issue 325: 28)

*Flight Lines* is another volume that combines a stunning collection of images with an informative and readable text. The book contains numerous photographs but it is the artwork that really grabs the attention, with many well-known artists contributing some of the best examples of

their work. The accompanying text is broken down into short sections and does an excellent job of explaining some of the key aspects of bird migration. If you are drawn in and captivated by the artwork, it is well worth resisting the temptation to skip ahead too quickly as there is much to learn from this book.

### 5th Multimedia Identification Guide to North Atlantic Seabirds: Albatrosses & Fulmarine Petrels

By Bob Flood and Ashley Fisher; Scilly Pelagics, 2016; reviewed on the BTO website by Paul Stancliffe

The third book in this series will not disappoint those who enjoyed the first two volumes. It covers just 11 species but contains an incredible amount of information, including hundreds of colour photographs and some fabulous illustrations, together with an engaging but comprehensive text. Add to the mix the distribution maps, based partly on the use of data from geolocators, and two DVDs with helpfully narrated footage of each species and it really is a comprehensive package for seabird enthusiasts.

### 6th= The Australian Bird Guide

By Peter Menkhorst, Danny Rogers, Rohan Clarke, Jeff Davies, Peter Marsack and Kim Franklin; Christopher Helm, 2017; reviewed by Andy Musgrove in *BTO News* (issue 325: 29)

There are parallels between this book and the *Collins Bird Guide* covering Britain and Europe in that it took almost a decade to complete and, while it has significant competition from existing guides, it stands head and shoulders above the rest. The team of three authors and three artists have produced a superbly well-organised and detailed text accompanied by high-quality illustrations and accurate, if rather small, distribution maps. The size and weight perhaps stretch the definition of 'field guide' to its limit but as almost 1,000 species are covered in detail, including around 160 vagrants, this was unavoidable.

### 6th= Birds of the Indonesian Archipelago: Greater Sundas and Wallacea

By James A. Eaton, Bas van Balen, Nick W. Brickle and Frank E. Rheindt; Lynx Edicions, 2016; reviewed on the BTO website by Neil Calbrade

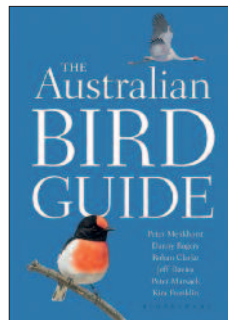
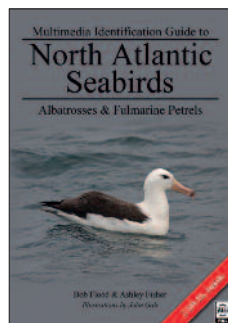
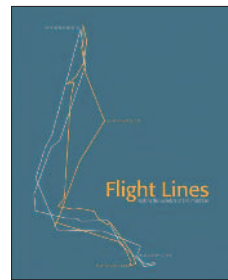
The authors of this guide had even more of a job on their hands than their Australian counterparts (above), having to accommodate over 1,400 species into a field-guide format. This they have done admirably, although the text for most species is necessarily brief and many species have only one or two accompanying images, taken primarily from the *Handbook of the Birds of the World*. The maps are clear and well produced, which is welcome for a region where many similar species are best identified by their different ranges. As the first guide covering the whole of this diverse and popular region, it will be widely used and appreciated by visiting birders.

The following books all received votes from at least one of the judges and are mentioned below in descending order of the overall number of votes received.

### Shorebirds in Action: an introduction to waders and their behaviour

(By Richard Chandler; Whittles Publishing, 2017 – see *Brit. Birds* 110: 764–765)

The fruits of a lifetime's interest in waders and photography are combined in this book to provide an



absorbing introduction to the group. The photographs have been carefully chosen to help illustrate key aspects of plumage and behaviour, and there is material for a high proportion of the world's waders.

### **Birds in Pictures**

(By Markus Varesvuo; New Holland, 2017 – see *Brit. Birds* 110: 688–689)

This large, lavishly produced volume showcases some spectacular images of birds, including many which go well beyond the typical or standard portraits. Lighting and angle are used to full effect to achieve some striking and surprising results for some of our most iconic species, as well as a few that are more common and familiar.

### **Raptors in Focus: a quest to find birds of prey in Europe and beyond**

(By Dick Forsman; New Holland, 2016 – see *Brit. Birds* 110: 63)

The author is well known for his expertise in the identification of raptors and has featured previously in this competition with his handbooks and field guides. This book is a more lavish offering, using a large format and brief text to showcase his impressive photographs and describe inspiring encounters with birds of prey.

### **Birds of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East: an annotated checklist**

(By Dominic Mitchell; Lynx Edicions, 2017 – see *Brit. Birds* 110: 633)

Keen bird listers will appreciate this valuable reference, which deals with over 1,000 species, including rarities, recorded up to the end of 2015. There are brief notes on distribution and taxonomy as well as the number of records for each country for the rarer species.

### **Bird Brain: an exploration of avian intelligence**

(By Nathan Emery; Ivy Press, 2016 – see [www.bto.org](http://www.bto.org), reviewed in January 2017)

This striking book covers a complex subject using a series of attractive, magazine-style, double-page spreads. It deals with navigation, migration, problem solving and many other related topics and while aimed primarily at the non-specialist it has enough detail to be useful to the more academically minded.

### **Winter Birds**

(By Lars Jonsson; Bloomsbury, 2017 – see *Brit. Birds* 110: 764)

This is a delightful combination of inspiring artwork and an insightful text, illustrating some of the most familiar birds seen around the author's studio on the island of Gotland in southern Sweden. It conveys the knowledge and enthusiasm of both artist and ornithologist, and will challenge all who read it to look more closely at the birds they see regularly.

### **Bowland Beth: the life of an English Hen Harrier**

(By David Cobham; HarperCollins, 2017 – see *Brit. Birds* 110: 633–634)

David Cobham, a former film producer, has written an unusual but engaging book about the short life of a satellite-tagged Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*. It tells the story of the bird using information derived from remote tracking as well as imagined snippets of its life, weaving in wider aspects of the debate about moorland management and its impacts on our birds of prey.

### **A Bird Guide to the Fields of Experience**

(By Frank Jarvis; Chatterpie, 2017 – see *Brit. Birds* 110: 691–692)

This is a highly individual book presenting paintings, sketches and extracts from the late author's diaries. It focuses on parts of Scotland and Norfolk in the 1980s and early 1990s, and will no doubt reignite some fond memories for keen birders active at that time.

#### **Acknowledgments**

As always, we are grateful to the BTO for making facilities available for judging at Swanwick and especially to Carole Showell for sourcing books from the Chris Mead Library at Thetford.

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