

Reviews

The Exeter Peregrines

By Nick Dixon, 2016

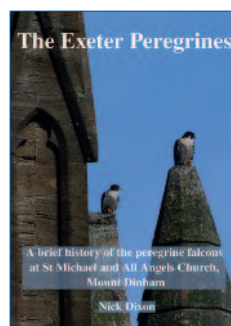
Pbk, 20pp; 15 colour photographs, table.

£6.00 (incl. postage) from www.urbanperegrines.co.uk

This booklet gives a brief and thorough account of the Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus* breeding on St Michael and All Angels Church in Exeter, Devon. First present in 1988, they started to breed in 1997 and have fledged chicks every year since. Individual adults have been identified and chicks have been ringed (since 2012). The birds have become noted for aggressive attacks on Common Buzzards *Buteo buteo*, as described in the author's contributions to *BB (Brit. Birds)* 108: 253–263; 109: 411–415. All proceeds from the sale of this booklet will go directly towards the

upgrading of the nest camera from analogue to HD resolution, prior to the 2017 breeding season, and to support the costs of live internet streaming. The booklet is well produced and designed (by the author) and is well worth the small outlay.

Robin Prytherch



The Cuckoo: the uninvited guest

By Oldřich Mikulica, Tomáš Grim, Karl Schulze-Hagen and Bård G. Stokke

Wild Nature Press, 2017

Hbk, 159pp; many colour photographs

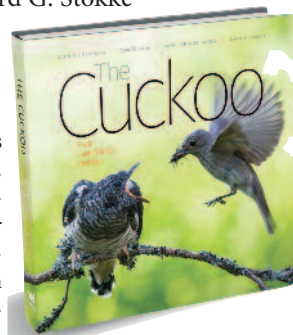
ISBN 978-0-9955673-0-6, £24.99

Advances in digital photography and printing technology are continually raising the bar when it comes to wildlife books based on photographs. This new volume is an excellent example, presenting a simply stunning collection of images of the Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* and its many hosts. The technology may be improving but there are still no shortcuts when it comes to capturing fleeting moments of rarely seen behaviour of this highly secretive bird. The majority of the photographs were taken at a single site (the Lužice fishponds in the Czech Republic) by Oldřich Mikulica, and they represent the result of a lifetime's knowledge and passion for this species. He is justifiably credited as the lead author. Pictures from a few other areas are included to ensure coverage of as wide a range of Cuckoo hosts as possible.

The images are paired with a lively, engaging and informative text, comprising 15 short chapters and many expanded photograph captions. The style is informal and relaxed but retains an authoritative feel, reflecting the experience and knowledge of the authors. There are very few clues that English is not their first language. The main focus of the book is on breeding behaviour, and the complex evolutionary arms race that continues to play out between this parasite and its many hosts. All aspects are well covered, including first arrival on the breeding grounds, host selection, searching for nests, egg-laying and the rearing of the over-

sized young by its foster parents. There is a fascinating chapter covering the innovative research methods developed to learn more about this bird. Another looks at the different strategies employed by other species of brood parasite; interesting variations on a theme to compare with the main subject. (If you thought Common Cuckoos were capable of treating their step-siblings badly, then spare a thought for the hapless chicks hatching next to a Greater Honeyguide *Indicator indicator*.) The book ends on a rather poignant note when considering recent declines of the Cuckoo in parts of Europe, something that readers in most parts of the UK will be all too well aware of.

Although the photograph captions are generally excellent, there were times when I felt that a little more detail would have been useful. There are, for example, many pictures showing food items being delivered to young Cuckoos but despite the detail revealed in the images we are not told what the species are, or given no more than 'dragonfly' or 'hairy caterpillar'. Readers with entomological pretensions will no doubt have fun trying to work out as many as possible. I would



also have liked more details of location for those images away from the main site at Lužice. And while I sympathise with the decision not to clutter the text with references, it would have been useful to have a more comprehensive list of further reading at the end of the book. Even some of the key studies mentioned in the text are not included.

Yet it seems churlish to find fault with such an impressive piece of work. This book is a real delight: it sets a new standard for books of its type and it is hard to imagine any readers of *BB* not enjoying it as well as learning a great deal from it.

Ian Carter

Finding Birds in Eastern Poland

By Dave Gosney

Easybirder.co.uk, 2016

DVD (77 mins, £15.95) and booklet (40pp, £7.50);
£19.95 if bought together

Eastern Poland has attracted many birders from the UK over the last two decades, tempted by a great selection of birds and relatively cheap accommodation. There are now direct flights to Warsaw from 13 UK airports, so getting there is straightforward as well. This is the nearest airport to the main birding sites featured here; the distance of around 120 km can be covered by car in three hours.

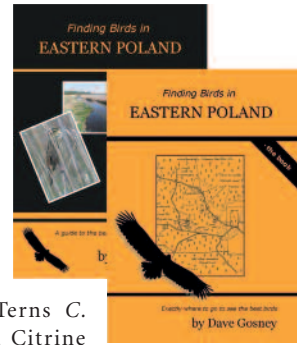
Probably the main site that birders want to head for first is the Biebrza Marshes, about 50 km north of Białystok. The DVD covers several sites within this 60,000 ha National Park where there are excellent chances of seeing species such as Lesser Spotted *Aquila pomarina* and Greater Spotted Eagle *A. clanga*, Great Snipe *Gallinago media*, Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus paludicola* and Barred Warbler *Sylvia nisoria*. A similar distance to the south of the city is the Białowieża Forest, famous for its Bison *Bison bonasus* and a great variety of birds, including Hazel Grouse *Tetrastes bonasia*, Pygmy *Glaucidium passerinum* and Tengmalm's Owl *Aegolius funereus*, Grey-headed *Picus canus*, Black *Dryocopus martius*, Three-toed *Picoides tridactylus*, Middle Spotted *Dendropicos medius* and White-backed Woodpeckers *Dendrocopos leucotos*, and Collared Flycatcher *Ficedula albicollis*. Not far away is Siemianowka Reservoir, which is a good place

to see Whiskered *Chlidonia hybrida*, Black *C. niger* and White-winged Black Terns *C. leucopterus* and Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*.

Way to the south – in fact 700 km away from the last site – are the Tatra Mountains, on the border with Slovakia. Apart from a good range of raptors, this area gives you chances of seeing Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo*, Serin *Serinus serinus*, Common Rosefinch *Erythrura erythrura*, Red-breasted Flycatcher *Ficedula parva* and Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes*. It is unlikely that you would combine all of these destinations, but the mountains are just 120 km from Krakow, which is served by 11 UK airports – so perhaps worthy of another trip.

In total, this DVD and booklet combination features 18 sites. As always, Dave's instructions are clear and his video commentary is relevant and informative. Over 70 species of birds are featured with high-definition digital video footage. The booklet features all of these sites and is full of maps, GPS references for specific species and tips for getting the best results.

Keith Betton



The 100 Best Birdwatching Sites in South East Asia

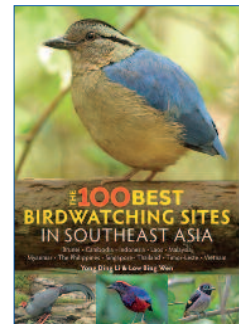
By Yong Ding Li and Low Bing Wen

John Beaufoy Publishing, 2016

Pbk, 328pp; numerous colour photographs
ISBN 978-1-909612-73-0, £19.99

This is an attractive book, which gives a good overview of many important birding sites in Southeast Asia. It has introductory chapters on the region's climate and geography, bird habitats, threats to birds and a 20-page resume of the bird

families of the region, although the last is readily available in field guides. This space would have been better



utilised by providing a systematic list of key species cross-referenced to their main locations. The book contains a good selection of photographs of many of the endemics and other specialities, although the A5 size format means that they are rather small.

In his foreword, David Wilcove states that the authors have produced the definitive bird-finding guide to Southeast Asia, giving directions to all the key sites, information on what birds to expect and tips on how to find them. Alas, that is not really the case. Each country chapter has introductory paragraphs with an accompanying map that shows a numbered list of featured sites in small buff-coloured print with the numbers used to pinpoint their locations on the map. The numbers are smaller still and difficult to distinguish, even with my 2× magnifiers! The text for each site features a list of key species, a description of the area and specific locations to visit, information about access and accommodation and brief notes on conservation including threats. While these give a good idea of what to expect for anyone visiting the sites

with a commercial bird tour, they lack the necessary information required for a birder to plan an independent trip. As an example, the section on the PICOP forest on Mindanao, Philippines, contains references to four birding areas but there are no detailed directions on how to get to them or maps of the specific areas; it mentions the only hotel in the nearby town of Bislig but gives no contact details; and states that the local bird guide is contactable through the hotel, when an e-mail address would be much more useful.

This is patently not a bird-finding guide. I may have misinterpreted the authors' intentions but my view is that they have been over ambitious in featuring 11 countries from Myanmar to Indonesia in one volume. Perhaps it would have been better to go for a series of guides featuring just one country, or adjacent countries such as Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, and to provide the full detail needed to enable independent birders to make a successful foray into these wonderful regions.

John Clark

The Stockamsel: an historical review

By Claudio Guerrieri

Privately published, 2016

Hbk, 250pp; many colour and black-and-white photographs

ISBN 978-0-9853028-3-2 £53.80

'This is the story of the *Stockamsel* – and its hopeless quest to become a unique bird species' – or so says the bio on the back of Claudio Guerrieri's book. In reality, this is less of a story and more of an exhaustive chronological review of every traceable reference to 'the Stockamsel', from 1750s Germany to modern-era handbooks. Most of us will know the term 'Stockamsel' in relation to young, 'scaly' male Blackbirds *Turdus merula*, but this book goes to show that the history of the term's use is far more complicated than just that. It is, in all honesty, a hard book to follow. The bulk of the text is made up of direct quotes, printed in their original language (in a bold Comic Sans font), followed by a full translation. Thus, a page-and-a-half quote in German takes three full pages of the book. The quote-laden stop-start nature of the writing, with no real connecting thread, makes for dreary reading at times. There are inconsistencies with plumage, topography and moult terminology, and with common and scientific names.

Ultimately you're left with the feeling that the author is venturing into territory of which he has very little prior knowledge. The book ends

with an extremely complicated Appendix detailing plumage and moult terminology, including such things as the complex alternate moult strategy. Its juxtaposition with the rest of the book is striking and confusing, like ending a newspaper article on a murder case solved using genetic evidence with lab protocol and a string of As, Ts, Gs & Cs.

For those who have an interest in historical German ornithology, etymology, or the use of the term Stockamsel throughout history, this book will likely prove a useful resource. Beyond that, I fear there is little more on which to recommend it.

Stephen Menzie

