

BOOK REVIEW

Birds of the Middle East. By R. F. Porter, S. Christensen, and P. Schiermacker-Hanson. 2004. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. 460 p. US\$35.00 paper. ISBN 0-691-12104-4.

Professional ornithologists and both serious and casual bird-watchers will appreciate *Birds of the Middle East*, an impressive new field guide. Apparently, this book was originally published in 1996 by another publisher but has been republished by Princeton University Press.

Birds of the Middle East was designed to be a comprehensive field guide as of 1996 for a large area that includes in their entirety the countries of Bahrain, Cypress, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, the West Bank and Gaza, the United Arab Emirates, and the Republic of Yemen (including the remarkable island of Socotra). In all, the authors describe 722 species.

In a brief introduction, the authors, using 7 illustrations, present the *topographic* terminology used to describe birds, then follow with an oddly placed acknowledgments page. Next in *Birds of the Middle East* are 112 color plates, one plate to a page. Each plate pictures from 5 to 10 species of birds, with multiple pictures for each species. Both male and females are pictured, as are (sometimes) juvenile specimens or seasonal, local, or regional variations. Opposite each plate page is the scientific name of each species, a common name for each species, brief descriptions of the status and habitat of each species, and a small map of each species' distribution. Following the section of plates, the authors provide descriptions of the bird species that include descriptions of appearance, behaviors, voice, flight (eg, wing beat), and other relevancies and curiosities. The book concludes with a list of important references on birds for each country, a complete species list, an index of common names, and an index of scientific names. The book is entirely in English and contains no Arabic or other languages.

The layout of *Birds of the Middle East* is attractive and effective. The maps, while small, are high in resolution, and the bird plates too have excellent resolution. The book offers most of what any professional or enthusiast would want in a field guide.

Although much of the Middle East is desert or semidesert, a significant number of arboreal, aquatic, and marine birds are found at least *somewhere* in the region. As a result, the bird list and the book's coverage are impressive, and *Birds of the Middle East* is much more relevant to North America than many would think. Darters, cormorants, swifts, swallows, pelicans, waxbills, flycatchers, kingfishers, warblers, thrushes, a hornbill—they are all pictured here, and some of the species are the same as those in North America or are nearly indistinguishably close relatives. As I evaluated this book, I couldn't help thinking how insignificant and underappreciated these birds are amid all the region's economic obsessions, religious contentions, and general petro-political ruckus. Somehow, despite—or maybe because of—all our freeways, condos, philosophies, and other manifestations of human ingenuity we pursue in our efforts to exploit, explode, overpopulate, heat up, or otherwise destroy our only planet, those birds are somehow better than we are. So with this fine avian field guide, you can see all that and more in the plates of those surprisingly familiar birds of the Middle East, and you won't even need infrared binoculars.

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