

HANDBOOK OF THE BIRDS OF THE WORLD, VOLUME 15: WEAVERS TO NEW WORLD WARBLERS. Edited by Josep del Hoyo, Andrew Elliott, and David Christie. Lynx Editions, Barcelona, Spain, 2010: 880 pages, 61 color plates, and 495 photographs. ISBN 978-84-96553-68-2. \$299.15 (cloth).—This volume of the ambitious HBW series with 606 species accounts covers another precise 1/16 of the world's bird species but, given the abundance of weavers and finches, probably much more than this fraction of the world's wild bird individuals. In fact, if the Handbooks weighted their treatment of species according to the number of individuals (recent estimates of the world's total ranging from 200 to 400 billion), hundreds of pages would be devoted to the Red-billed Quelea (*Quelea quelea*) alone, whose estimated population size is in the billions. But hardly a note would then be spared for one of the world's most spectacular but sadly decimated bird families, the Hawaiian honeycreepers (Drepanididae). Thankfully, Volume 15 gives them ample space, abutting the expansive treatment of their parent family, the nearly globally successful finches (Fringillidae, native everywhere but Australasia). Also often called 'finches' but a separate granivorous radiation rooted in Africa is a trio

of families that fill another large portion of the volume: the weavers (Ploceidae), and their allies the estrildids (waxbills) and viduids (indigobirds and whydahs). Finally, this volume treats the New World birders' darlings, the wood warblers (Parulidae, often loudly dressed and tastefully voiced), along with their frequent neighbors the vireos (Vireonidae, often loudly voiced and tastefully dressed). The lone Olive Warbler (*Peucedramus taeniatus*) is probably related to the accentors covered back in Volume 10, but is kept in this volume as its own family next to the warblers for appearance' sake (i.e., it looks and acts like one) and at least a couple of other putative warblers are stuck here that are probably tanagers. Thus, eight families are covered, including some of the most familiar and well studied birds in the world.

Before diving into the families, following an excellent HBW tradition, the volume begins with an extensive topical Foreword, this one an update to the global state of bird conservation. The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development set 2010 as a target deadline to 'significantly reduce biodiversity loss'. The central message from the four authors, all major players in BirdLife International, is that with respect to birds, we failed. We know a lot more now, but knowledge was never really the main issue. We've known enough for a while, but we failed to do much about it. Roughly half of the world's bird species have declining populations, and one in eight is threatened with global extinction. The most significant threats are agriculture, wood harvesting, and invasive species. The argument, and more generally the presented picture of the current state of bird conservation, is tremendously informative with 58 color figures attractively complementing the textual description of the status of the world's birds, underlying reasons for the trends, and possible solutions and mitigations.

Typically for the series, the species accounts are preceded by a scholarly but accessible description of the family, with standardized sections: Systematics, Morphological Aspects, Habitat, General Habits, Voice, Food and Feeding, Breeding, Movements, Relationship with Man, Status and Conservation. Interspersed with a generally comprehensive view of the taxonomy, lifestyle, and natural history of the family are samplings from recent and classic behavioral or ecological studies, observations by naturalists, and

even literary and historical points relating to the birds or the names we give them. Each author is generally a major scholar—indeed, often the undisputed heavyweight champion—of the respective family. The photographs that accompany these descriptions are stunning, without qualification. A small army of ornithopaparazzi have caught birds in the midst of virtually every aspect of their daily activity—nestbuilding, foraging, courting, copulating, bathing, tending young—and have presented these scenes to us with perfect vibrancy and artistry. Equally exquisite are the wonderfully large plates opposite the accounts, depicting every bird species, including both males and females if dimorphic, and subspecies if they look different.

To criticize an installment of an unprecedented overview of the world's birds feels somewhat like an exercise in ingratitude, since the very existence of this series—the fact that these people have bothered to do it, and have in the end produced this masterpiece—is inspiring and encouraging. Nevertheless, any critic will always have done it differently. I would have liked to see introduced ranges mapped (the House Finch [*Carpodacus mexicanus*] is the only species for which this is done, insofar as its introduced range is in the same continent). The absence of citations in the text of the family descriptions renders them much less useful as a scientific resource, because the trouble of searching out the sources of claims is prohibitive. For instance, if we want to follow up on the idea that the head coloration of the Red-headed Quelea (*Quelea erythops*) is an arbitrary signal and not an indicator, or that the white tail patches of the Slate-throated Whitestart (*Myioborus miniatus*) function in startling prey into flight, there is no easy way this can be done. The large General Bibliography (actually a list of authors and dates) at the end of each family description is of very little specific use. But perhaps this and other criticisms I have in mind have a common thread, and reveal that I might not be quite in step with the purpose of the series. Perhaps I am wanting this Handbook to be more a review of the scientific literature, when in fact its function is mainly to introduce us to all of the birds, what they do, how they live, and where they occur. Each family section is like an extended episode of the BBC Life of Birds followed by a field guide on steroids. It is comprehensive in terms of species, but not in terms of what is known about each species. It is

full of photos of birds in action, but there are no figures or illustrations of results of detailed scientific investigations of these birds. We find loads of behavior and conservation but very little evolution or physiology. There is discussion of phylogenetic relationships, but no trees and only simple (and misleading) subfamily diagrams. After coming to grips with the specific mission or function of the series, one can see this volume meets this function very well. We should expect to read about the cage bird trade, for instance (given the significant role the estrildids and the canary have had), but not necessarily song learning and its neurobiological basis (despite the significant role the Common Chaffinch [*Fringilla coelebs*], Zebra Finch [*Taeniopygia guttata*], and Atlantic Canary [*Serinus canaria*] have had). There are notable exceptions to this general picture, however, especially in the area of evolution, such as the description of speciation by host switch and mimicry in indigobirds, and the excellent coverage of the problems faced when constructing phylogenies of the vireos and warblers. Still, as a parting shot, I'll just mention three wishes I'd have had for exceptions to the behavioral-photographs-and-species-plates-only rule for illustrations, that I think would have adhered well to the HBW mission: a series of photographs of the mouth markings of estrildids, another of the eggs of weavers, and a plate of illustrations of weaver nests. I did enjoy seeing the plate of extinct honeycreepers; however, these eight complement a previous eight that appeared in Volume 7, page 58 in a Foreword on bird extinctions.

To say that this is a bird lover's book is not to denigrate it, and even for ornithologists it is much more than a 'curl up and read shop' book. There is a wealth of information here suitable for teaching, data mining, example-searching for review papers, and even hypothesis generation. And let's face it, most of the people who will buy this \$300 tome are actually professional ornithologists or at least die-hard birders who know as much as professional ornithologists. Besides, we already know how to search for our references when we need them. That's boring stuff compared to the delights of this book and of the HBW in general. I look forward to the one last volume to come.—DAVID C. LAHTI, Assistant Professor, Queens College, City University of New York, 65-30 Kissena Blvd., Flushing, NY 10541, USA; e-mail: david.lahti@qc.cuny.edu