

# Best bird book verdict proves to be close run thing

What was last year's best bird book? We asked readers and a distinguished panel of experts to nominate their choices for this title. Here is the verdict

## THE LIBRARIAN'S CHOICE Ian Dawson, RSPB

'Last year was an expensive one for the bird bibliophile. One candidate on my shortlist is *Threatened Birds of the Americas: the ICBP/IUCN Red Data Book* by N J Collar *et al*, published by the ICBP. The amount of information collated here is quite staggering.

'However, two books tower above the rest: Lars Jonsson's eagerly awaited guide has already become the first port of call when checking the appearance of any European species. It is not only aesthetically ravishing, but Jonsson's paintings can be trusted as if you were looking at a skin or photograph. Nor should the text be ignored: this is much the best source now available for voice descriptions.

'*Birds of the World* was the surprise package of the year, and what a surprise! I admit that I had subscribed more in hope than expectation. The paintings of every species range from perfectly adequate to excellent, but these are only a part of this work. The photographs - depicting a good proportion of the species covered - are outstanding, the lengthy family accounts are well written and very readable, and the standardised species accounts complete an outstanding work of reference.

'It's now my first stop when researching any species from Ostrich to Musk Duck for two

main reasons: the information given for each species under the heading "Status and conservation" is generally not easily available elsewhere, and is right up to date where recent data exist; and the bibliography, included for every single species, lists all major sources of further information, and again is very current.

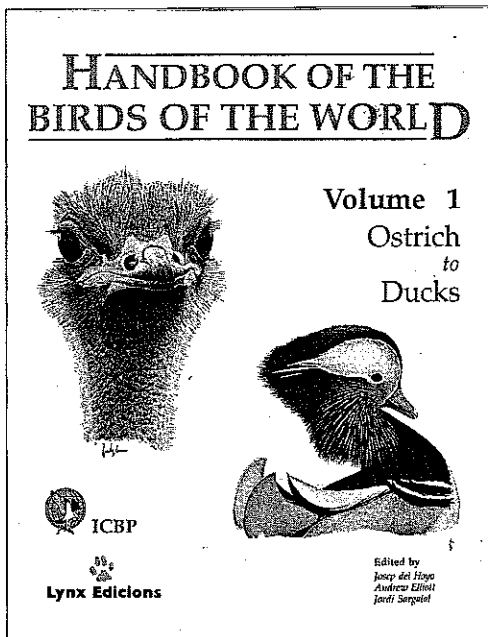
'Another plus is the listing and indexing of every subspecies with its authority and distribution (subspecies are listed, but not indexed, in Howard and Moore). Moreover, for such a mammoth undertaking, I have come across very few errors. Let's hope that subsequent volumes will appear at regular intervals, not too far apart, and maintain the standard of Volume 1. The more I use it, the more I am impressed.

'If marooned on the proverbial desert island, I would find it almost impossible to choose between Jonsson (the choice for sheer pleasure) and *Birds of the World*. But if forced, I would have to plump for the latter, if only because the huge amount of data therein would keep my brain cells occupied for a longer period. And many of the world's seabirds are included, some of which might enliven seawatches from the palm-fringed beach!

## THE WRITER'S CHOICE David Tomlinson

'The best is *Birds of Europe* by Lars Jonsson. Simply superb, my favourite field guide so far, and coupled with Lewington's *Rare Birds* (published by HarperCollins), all you need for Europe.

'The worst book of 1992 is *The Pocket Guide to Birds of Prey of Britain and Northern Europe*. I gave the reasons for this choice in a review in *New Scientist*, but fancy



species is hilarious in places, with tales of bureaucratic stupidity, life-threatening encounters with bandits, jealous Arabs and hippos, to say nothing of Gerard Morel's Golden Sparrow wine.

'The book is illustrated with the author's black and white photographs, plus super line drawings by Euan Dunn, each depicting, in light-hearted fashion, one of the Summers-Smith's adventures. If you're looking for a book to brighten a birdless day, then you must 'dip' into this one.'

## BIRDWATCH

### BIRD BOOK OF THE YEAR 1992

*Handbook of the Birds of the World, Volume 1 (Ostrich to Ducks)* edited by del Hoyo, Elliott and Sargatal (Lynx Edicions, Barcelona)

including a Bateleur in a book with such a title!

### THE EXPERT'S CHOICE Peter Rathbone

'With so many major new books appearing in 1992, it is impossible to pick out a personal favourite as each has aspects which have great appeal. I do not, therefore, propose to select any of the top-profile publications, but prefer instead to give my vote to a highly entertaining and readable account of a birdman's experiences while researching for a monograph on sparrows.

'*In Search of Sparrows* by Denis Summers-Smith is one of the best reads I have enjoyed for a long time. His stories of encounters with people and animals during his quest for world sparrow

### THE ARTIST'S CHOICE Killian Mullarney

'Without hesitation I can say that, for me, the bird book of the year - indeed of many years - is Lars Jonsson's *Birds of Europe*. Its great strength over all other guides is Jonsson's ability to convey the personality and sheer beauty of living birds in his paintings.

'I've lost count of the number of times a Jonsson portrait has opened my eyes to previously unnoticed features of a bird, even with 'familiar' species; the beauty of his images induces an overwhelming desire to take another look at even the most ordinary birds.

'Jonsson's paintings are clear testimony to his interest not just in the key identification features which preoccupy so many of the current generation of keen-birders, but also in the countless subtleties of shape, plumage and demeanour which, together, contribute so much to a bird's character.

'To most of us with artistic ambitions the appeal of Jonsson's work is inextricably linked to his masterful control of paint, as evident in his seemingly effortless creation of habitat surrounding his

All the books featured in BIRDWATCH can be ordered through the BOOKWATCH service using the order form on page 53

Wood Sandpipers on page 243, or his Nightjars on pages 328 and 329.

'However, even Gods can have feet of clay and I'm not going to pretend that I find every image in this book equally pleasing. I confess that on the few occasions when the bird in front of me hasn't quite matched its Jonsson portrait it has been difficult to resist suspecting the bird of being wrong!'

### THE READER'S CHOICE John Cantelo

'To have a strong visual sense and a delight in colour and pattern must be an important factor in becoming a birder. Not surprisingly, then, most birders have a weakness for finely illustrated bird books:

'Text is important, of course, but it is the illustrations that win devotion. Accordingly, the choice of the best bird book of 1992 would seem to rest between two superbly illustrated volumes: Harris and Fry's *Kingfishers, Bee-eaters and Rollers* and Jonsson's *Birds of Europe*.

'For me, Jonsson's sheer artistic virtuosity wins by a short head over Harris's gorgeous kingfishers. This, plus its greater utility for British birdwatchers and a slightly lower price, must surely mean that most birders will opt for Jonsson's book as the best of the year.

'Despite being an admirer of Jonsson's work, however, I think that such a choice would be mistaken. Without a doubt, *The Handbook of the Birds of the World* should be awarded this accolade. Such an heroic and Herculean task demands recognition. The photographs are of a very high standard and, although they may not quite reach the Olympian level of the other two books, the plates are extraordinarily good.

'The text is superbly judged and provides a unique source of information. The introductory chapters to each family provide an unrivalled digest of current knowledge and succinctness. It is also a major weapon in the fight for the conservation of birds

throughout the world. Being far more expensive than either of its rivals, fewer will be sold, but it alone can justly be called seminal.

'As for the worst bird book of 1992, I refuse to express an opinion since this would not only be uncharitable, but also probably actionable! Besides, being able to recall a time when an exciting bird book appeared, at best, every other year, the odd poor book is small price to pay for so many excellent ones.'

### THE EDITOR'S CHOICE Dominic Mitchell

'1992 really was a bumper year for the bird book enthusiast, and with so many to choose from making a final selection is always difficult.

'For me, one of the best indicators of a good bird book is not just how much you enjoy reading it, but how much you really do use it - either in the field or at home. From this personal perspective alone, Lars Jonsson's *Birds of Europe* would surely be a winner. It's a little too hefty for the pocket, but a more comprehensive, well planned and accurate work on Europe's birds would be hard to imagine.

'With a wider view, however, shining through must be *Handbook of the Birds of the World*. The publication of such a monumental work would seem almost unthinkable, yet the first volume has been a mould-breaker with its breadth and depth of coverage, and a high quality format which combines handbook-style illustrations with colour photographs, and descriptive text for each species with a comprehensive background to each family and group.

'The authors and publishers have excelled in producing such a definitive volume of appeal to birders and ornithologists everywhere. *Handbook of the Birds of the World* therefore deserves to be overall first choice, and is a worthy winner of *BIRDWATCH*'s Best Bird Book of 1992 title.'

## Field guide choice has never been more varied

Spring is here once more and it is a time when a birdwatcher's fancy undoubtedly turns to thoughts of migrants, so it may be appropriate to review the British and European field guides currently available.

At the top of the list must be Lars Jonsson's *Birds of Europe with North America and the Middle East*. Widely acclaimed on its publication, this well designed book has received excellent reviews and is destined to remain a best-seller for many years to come.

The plates are quite



An appetising plate of owls from the latest edition of *Birds of Britain and Europe* in the Collins Field Guide series

exceptional and the expert text is written in a most readable and interesting style, with up-to-date distribution maps for each species. A little pricey, at £25, it is, nevertheless, a book which all birders should have in their library.

This month sees the

## THE BOOKWATCH COLUMN

appearance of the revised fifth edition of *Birds of Britain and Europe* by Peterson, Mountfort and Hollom. Published in the Collins Field Guide series, it is the latest version of the prototype modern style field guide which first appeared way back in 1954.

Roger Tory Peterson revolutionised bird ID books with his feature highlighting technique which is still retained in this new book. Some of the plates have been redesigned and the text updated. If, like me, you have the first four volumes on your shelf, I am sure you will wish to complete the set. In line with HarperCollins current pricing structure, the book comes in at £14.99.

Another trusted guide which has recently been revised under a new plastic protected cover design is Hamlyn's *Birds of Britain and Europe* by Bruun, Delin and Svensson. The book follows the preferred design by having the text and map for each species on the opposite page to the illustration which is a very convenient format, finding favour with most birders. Over 530 species are illustrated in full colour. It is a very good value at £7.99.

Finally, another HarperCollins book remains high on my list for the simple reason that it also covers areas of peripheral but nevertheless important interest, namely the Canary Islands, Madeira and the Azores. *Collins Pocket Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe with North Africa and the Middle East* by Heinzel, Fitter and Parslow follows the same design format as the Hamlyn guide and is a very handy pocket size at £9.99.

Peter Rathbone  
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