



**West African Ornithological Society
Société d'Ornithologie de l'Ouest
Africain**



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Storks, Ibises and Spoonbills of the World. By J.A. Hancock, J.A. Kushlan & M.P. Kahl, 1992. 385 pp., 49 colour plates, 40 colour photographs. Academic Press, London. ISBN 012-322730-5. £65.00.

Of the making of bird books there is no end, and the market is apparently inexhaustible. Popular at present are books dealing with related species on a world-wide basis, sub-divided into the manageable, e.g. the Christopher Helm series, and the coffee table type. At first sight this book belongs to the latter – it weighs some 5 lb – but it is not a coffee table production, which implies something intellectually lightweight, and it is certainly not for bedtime reading.

A book of 385 pages, dealing with only 49 species, and including 54 triple-columned pages of references, is not aimed at the dilettante, though the introductory sections, covering Classification, Conservation, Courtship and Reproduction, Feeding Behaviour and Ecology, and illustrated with some splendid photographs (almost all by the authors themselves) can be read as much by the non-expert as the specialist – indeed the opening Classification paragraphs predicate a surprising lack of knowledge among readers.

However, the authors quickly move on to explaining their taxonomic criteria (for a really excellent discussion see pages 153-154 on whether the American *Eudocimus* ibises constitute one or two species). In their survey they include the Shoebill *Balaeniceps rex* but exclude the Hamerkop *Scopus umbretta*, a decision African readers will regret as, despite the obvious differences, the Hamerkop is always regarded as close to the storks and, on a practical level, among family monographs it is unlikely to find a niche elsewhere.

The bulk of the book consists of species accounts, of 3-11 pages each (about some ibises very little is known), including one full-page painting and a distribution map. Pages are double column except for the first page of each entry, which I find disconcerting. The maps for all the species I know, though inevitably small-scale, seem adequate. The paintings by Alan Harris and David Quinn are meticulously detailed, not always totally successful in giving life to the birds, but some – the supreme example Quinn's Shoebill – marvellously evocative.

Rightly, stress is laid on conservation. Large, slow-flying birds are particularly at risk to hunting pressure; wetlands are drained, food chains poisoned, even the large trees needed for nest colonies cut down. The status of some, particularly Asian, species is already near catastrophe. For Africa, I suspect the authors are a little complacent in suggesting there is no immediate threat. Of the 49 species, 15 occur in West Africa, either as residents or migrants, and I think that anyone who has spent long in any part of the region will agree that locally, little by little, numbers are diminishing. One example: the only breeding colony of African Spoonbills *Platalea alba* I knew in Sierra Leone used to be secure because of local taboos. With outsiders moving into the area, those taboos were eroded and even 12 years ago the young were increasingly pillaged for food; I do not suppose that trend

has been reversed since.

However, this book is both very readable and as comprehensive as the available evidence allows and will remain the basis for future researches. Anyone particularly interested in this group needs this book. For more general birdwatchers I suspect the price is rather high.

G.D. Field

Enquête Faunistique dans la Forêt du Mayombe et Check-liste des Oiseaux et des Mammifères du Congo. By F. Dowsett-Lemaire & R.J. Dowsett, 1989. Tauraco Research Report 2.

Flore et Faune du Bassin du Kouilou (Congo) et leur Exploitation. Ed. by R.J. Dowsett & F. Dowsett-Lemaire, 1991. Tauraco Research Report 4.

Both available from Tauraco Press, rue de Bois de Breux 194, B-4020 Jupille-Liège, Belgium.

Report no. 2 summarises the results of the authors' three weeks' field work in the eastern part of Mayombe in the dry season of 1989 (part of the UNDP/UNESCO "Projet Mayombe"). They added 50 species to the Congo bird list, of which 16 represent important range extensions southwards from Gabon. The most interesting discovery was of *Zoothera gurneyi* on a montane stepping-stone between Cameroon and Angola. The report includes the first attempt at a comprehensive review of the avifauna of Congo since Malbrant & Maclatchy's (1949). Their compilation listed 500 species but, in view of the under-explored nature of the country and the diversity of habitat, the authors predicted that this figure should increase to at least 700. Indeed, subsequent additions were recently published by these authors and P. Bulens (1993 *Malimbus* 15: 68-80).

Report no. 4 is a more substantial work. Commissioned as an environmental impact study for an onshore oil exploration drilling campaign by Conoco, the report presents the results of seven months' field work in the coastal basin area. The impact of human activity on soil erosion (a major problem in this area) is understated in this report. However, its value lies in the wealth of new data presented on the fauna. Half of the 22 chapters (especially those on mammals and hunting) are in French, the rest in English.

The first of the two ornithological chapters reviews the onshore distribution of mainly forest birds and includes observations on the ecology, behaviour and vocalisations of selected species. The songs of *Canirallus oculus*, *Muscicapa olivascens* and *Pholidornis rushiae* are described for the first time. Based on