



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



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Book Reviews — Revues de Livres

The Tropical Rain Forest. By P.W. Richards, 1996 (2nd ed.). xxiii + 575 pp., numerous monochrome photographs and diagrams. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. ISBN: 0-521-42054-7, hardback, £90; 0-521-42194-2, paperback, £32.50.

There is no sentimentalism in this book. When the late Prof. Richards (he died in 1995) writes of the destruction of his subject in the four decades since his classic first edition, he does so dispassionately and with a sense of inevitability; but his deep regret is evident. He accurately predicted, in the first edition, the losses that have been experienced during this period; his new predictions for the future of what remains, although tinged with some hope, are equally distressing, and equally realistic. When the first edition appeared in 1952, "the tropical rain forests could be thought of as stretching endlessly over vast areas but now their nearly complete destruction is not far from realisation." These losses will affect the future course of evolution: rain forests, owing to their immense diversity, have generated more evolutionary lineages than probably any other terrestrial community. There is a cool and level-headed review of conservation prospects in the last chapter.

The book has been completely rewritten, with new chapters and new contributing authors: R.P.D. Walsh on climate, I.C. Baillie on soils and, for ornithologists needing to relate their studies to analysis of rainforest structure and composition, a useful appendix on numerical methods by P. Greig-Smith. It is a first-class text, although not encyclopaedic, and it is still (understandably) written from a botanist's viewpoint. It may be churlish to point out that what may be the only bird named (Fig. 5.1) is mis-spelt (*Nectarinia* "ventusa"), as is its Family ("Nectarinidae"). There is also, from an ornithologist's viewpoint, disappointingly little on fruiting seasons in the phenology chapter, and it is notable that many of the references cited in this section are by ornithologists. Some other sections are of special interest to readers of *Malimbus*: e.g. 16.4 on forest-savanna relationships in West Africa deals with the role of humans and fire in maintaining savanna. Most of the West African examples used in the book are from Nigeria.

The book begins with an accurate and evocative description of what a rainforest looks like — what it's like to be inside one. A slight criticism is that the distribution maps of rainforest types are not quite up to date and do not correspond with their definitions, and reference to the IUCN atlas (J. Sayer *et al.*, 1992, *The Conservation Atlas of Tropical Forests: Africa*, Macmillan, Basingstoke) is limited. Some other recent (last 20 years) research has been missed, e.g. the "staggered" fruiting seasons of the bird-dispersed *Miconia* have actually been shown to be random and not co-evolved with their dispersers (pp. 238, 295). There are some minor production errors: parts of pages transposed, captions reversed *etc.*, but these are few.

My other general observation, rather than criticism, is that the book reveals how, in many ways, ecological botany is some way behind zoology. Analysis of rainforest structure is still largely descriptive: why the structure is as it is, and why regional differences exist, are questions that are still not fully addressed. There is, in general, not enough attempt at explanation in ecological-evolutionary terms, and much more credence is given to the notion that a characteristic may have no functional explanation than would be the case in zoology. Features of tropical rainforest, such as the thinness of tree bark, are often described, without comment as to why they should be so characteristic of the system, although there are exceptions: the functions of buttresses and stilt roots, and the uniformity of leaf shape and rarity of wind-pollinated flowers are extensively discussed. However, zoologists are lucky in dealing with systems that are easier to investigate: tropical forest botany treats with organisms whose lifespan is measured in centuries.

Despite the above criticisms, I would have absolutely no hesitation in recommending this new book to anyone who wants to understand rainforest biology; it is an excellent review of its field. And in the impoverished present and future world, it will, as the publisher claims, "stand as a record of what the rainforest was like in the twentieth century": a sad, but all too accurate, recommendation for this masterly work.

Alan Tye

Las Aves de Bioko, Guinea Ecuatorial. By J. Pérez del Val. 1996. 240 pp., incl. 25 col. plates, numerous maps. Edilesa. León. ISBN 84-8012-145-9 paperback. No price given.

This book is especially surprising as it is the first complete field guide for any West African country, or substantial part of a country, and that country is currently one of the least-visited by ornithologists. Besides that, it is entirely in Spanish: appropriate for use within the country, but I hope that an English translation will appear soon, for this would considerably increase its readership. It has no competitor, and is useful for West Africa outside Bioko, as it deals with many widespread species. Its nearest rival is *A Field Guide to the Birds of West Africa* (Serle & Morel 1975, Collins, London), but the new book is far better for the species which it includes: the descriptions are at least as good and the plates are mostly better.

There are useful introductory sections on history, geography, biology, and the history of ornithological exploration of the former Fernando Po. The intense interest in the island during the pre-colonial and colonial periods resulted in a comparatively high level of ornithological work at that time, but the country's unfortunate post-colonial turmoil prevented a continuation of these studies, until very recently. The author has spent several years on the island, along with a number of Spanish collaborators. The book is more than a field guide and serves also as an authoritative