



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



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Reviews — Revues

Rails. A guide to the rails, crakes, gallinules and coots of the world. By B. Taylor & B. van Perlo, 1998. 600 pp. incl. 43 col. plates, many maps and line drawings. Pica Press, Mountfield. ISBN 1-873403-59-3, hardback, £35.

This is a true monograph in Pica Press style, with exhaustive treatment of all aspects of the biology of each species, over 1800 references and much unpublished information included. At the same time it is a good identification guide and source of information for conservation planning, and is embellished with thoughtful touches, such as every species listed individually in the Contents, with text and plate numbers side by side.

The author admits that much is repeated from his accounts in the Handbook to the Birds of the World (vol. 3, J. del Hoyo *et al.* 1996, Lynx, Barcelona) and, in fact, the introductory sections are pretty much word-for-word identical. However, the Handbook species accounts have less complete descriptions, voice, moult and behaviour sections, and the Handbook does not treat surely or probably extinct species. The Handbook plates are, to my eye, better than those in the present work (van Perlo's distinctive style often results in odd shapes), but include fewer juveniles.

That said, the introductory sections of the present book, on phylogeny, habitat, food, behaviour, breeding, and especially flightlessness, voice, movements, conservation and extinction are fascinating. Rail voices are famously varied and striking, including "screams, squeals, trills, whistles, whines, hoots, moans, booms, rattles, clicking and ticking notes, snoring noises, humming and buzzing sounds, trumpets, roars, grunts, barks, frog-like croaks and snake-like hisses"; the *Aramides* wood-rails perhaps take the prize for extremes, with "crazed-sounding rollicking, popping and clicking notes" and "congregating ... to set up a deafening chorus of screams, shrieks and wheezes".

Some 10% of rail species have gone extinct since 1600, all of them island species and most flightless. One of the most absorbing features of the book is the inclusion of all such species, most of them given full treatment. If one includes prehistoric anthropogenic extinctions, many islands have lost up to 80% of their land birds, including 1000–3000 rail species in Oceania alone. Human-caused loss of bird life may amount to 20% of the global avifauna, which, with the thousands of plant and other animal species lost, vividly illustrates the current biological catastrophe caused by man.

The author's main interest is the African flufftails *Sarothrura*, and much of the recent information on them derives from his own studies. His love of the family shines through, however, in the treatment of all species, which is uniformly excellent. The book is a masterpiece.

Alan Tye