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Owls. A guide to the owls of the world. By C. König, F. Weick and J.-H. Becking, 1999. 462 pp., 64 colour plates. Pica Press, Mountfield. ISBN 1-873403-74-7. Hardback, £35.

This substantial work from Pica Press follows a similar format to its other recent volumes (see above). An introduction to owl biology is followed by a guest chapter by M. Wink and P. Heidrich on molecular evolution and systematics. The bulk of the book is devoted to species accounts and colour plates.

Some 212 species of owls are described. This compares with 205 in the recently published *Handbook of the Birds of the World* (HBW) vol. 5 (J. del Hoyo *et al.* 1999, Lynx, Barcelona) and 151 species in Boyer & Hume's 1991 *Owls of the World* (Dragon's World, Surrey). From where have all these new species appeared? Many are scops owls *Scops* or screech owls *Otus*. Some are newly discovered but others represent the elevation of former subspecies to species level. The authors state that they have used the biological species concept, with new splits based on new knowledge of vocalisations and phylogenetic studies based on mitochondrial DNA.

The 64 colour plates are an important feature of the book, depicting all species, distinct subspecies, colour morphs and, for some species, juvenile plumage. Illustrations of owls in flight are also given for some species. This results in about twice as many illustrations as on the 20 larger plates in HBW. The latter however wins out in its much greater coverage of natural history and stunning colour photographs in its introductory sections. The plates are of typical field guide style and although most are excellent they are not so artistically satisfying as those of Boyer. One discrepancy I noticed was that Vermiculated Fishing Owl *Scotopelia bouvieri* is correctly illustrated with brown eyes but the facing text describes these as yellow.

Each species account presents information subdivided under the headings identification, vocalisations, distribution, movements, habitat, description, measurements and weight, geographical variation, habits, food, breeding, status and conservation, remarks and references and includes a distribution map. Some corrections to these maps are included as an errata slip but, as in *The Birds of Africa* vol. 3 (Fry *et al.* 1988, Academic Press, London) and HBW, Nigeria is omitted from the range of Vermiculated Fishing Owl despite four published records (J.H. Elgood 1982, *The Birds of Nigeria*, BOU, London). Recent reports (A. Turk, *Bull. Afr. Bird Club* in press) suggest that a healthy population of the species remains near Agenbode, Nigeria.

The authors place the Itombwe (CongoBay) Owl in the genus *Tyto*, considering this species to be more similar to other *Tyto* than to *Phodilus*. The taxonomic treatment for other African owls found here parallels that in HBW and differs from *The Birds of Africa*, in that specific status is given to African Scops Owl *Otus senegalensis*, Pharaoh Eagle Owl *Bubo ascalaphus*, Vermiculated Eagle Owl *B. cinerascens*, Red-chested Owlet *Glaucidium castaneum* and Abyssinian Long-eared Owl *Asio abyssinicus*. White-faced Scops Owls are placed in *Ptilopsis* with *leucotis*

and *granti* treated as separate species on the grounds of vocal differences and DNA evidence. These taxa are morphologically very similar to each other and it is disappointing that the basis for this decision is not fully presented. However this and similar, sometimes controversial, taxonomic decisions should prompt further research on species and species boundaries in owls.

There are frequent references in the “remarks” sections of the species accounts to species differences being deduced from differences in vocalisations yet, *contra* HBW, the Usambara (Nduk) Eagle Owl *Bubo poensis vosseleri* which is larger, darker and elsewhere noted to differ vocally from other populations, is cautiously not given specific status. I look forward to the accompanying CD of owl vocalisations, which is to be published separately, but regret the lack of sonograms that in many instances would have greatly enhanced the systematic text.

The book is good value for £35, especially so because of the wealth of colour illustrations. Although those with a general interest in owls may already have been catered for by HBW, this volume will prove an essential additional reference for many owl enthusiasts.

Roger Wilkinson