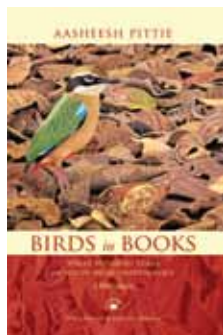


Reviews



Birds in books: three hundred years of South Asian ornithology—a bibliography.

By Aasheesh Pittie. 2010.

Ranikhet: Permanent Black.

Price: Rs 795 / £ 45.50.

An amazing work covering an often neglected aspect of Ornithology—the bibliography of the multitude of books published that deal with the birds of the South Asian region (here defined rather broadly as comprising the countries Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Tibet). This is not a book to read but rather one to dip into, either following a lead to discover more about the works of a particular author, or simply to discover some of the fascinating facts sprinkled throughout the book.

An introduction sets the scene, with a brief mention of the main publications produced during each half century since the early 18th century. Then the main part of the book consists of an annotated listing of 1715 books published during the period 1713 to 2008. Most items are annotated with publication details and a summary of their contents. A good few have a very useful indication of their ornithological content and importance, written by the compiler and, where relevant, a list of new taxon names and type locality restrictions. Note that items 121 and 1692 are the same publication listed under different authors, as are 1475 and 1484, and that item 1672, although given a publication date of 1999, has still not been published! There are brief biographies of 219 former authors, mainly those with listed books, although some, e.g., Blaauw, have not apparently written any relevant books. Some other important authors, e.g., B. H. Hodgson, who published many scientific papers on birds of the region, but no books, are not included. A general index is followed by an index of 630 new scientific bird names appearing in the listed books, and finally there is an index of acronyms, co-authors and co-editors.

The definition of a 'book' that is adopted is very broad and includes some titles from serial publications that comprise a complete account of a country or region. Also included are a number of regional checklists, some in the form of pamphlets and perhaps not validly published. However, their inclusion can only be considered a benefit to researchers, many of whom have to rely on international abstract services, which are good

at capturing papers in mainstream serials/periodicals but very variable in their coverage of minor periodicals and regional books.

As a fellow bibliographer I have greatly appreciated this book for drawing attention to a large number of references of which I was previously unaware, and for providing useful summaries of others about which I knew very little.

Many of the listed items are not readily available, even from specialist libraries, owing to their rarity or obscurity, and this is indicated by the fact that 773 are annotated as <not seen> by the compiler. Some of these are now available online from the Biodiversity Heritage Library (<http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>) and other similar projects, and it is to be hoped that the majority of relevant publications, which are out-of-copyright or copyright waived, will eventually become available in this way.

The compiler realises that there may be titles that he has not seen, read about or heard of and, certainly, this type of compilation can never be truly complete, both because of new publications and the large number of books that mention birds in passing. One publisher that is surprisingly deficient in the listings is the Zoological Survey of India, with 81 relevant items published between 1981 and 2008 missing—although all are readily available in India. The items include 17 out of the 18 from the State Fauna Series (only that for West Bengal is listed); this Series is clearly important for cataloguing the regional distribution of the avifauna (although the volumes perused are very incomplete in terms of their species coverage—that for West Bengal includes only 53.6% of the estimated 915 bird species recorded in the State).

The information on new names is stated to be extracted from Baker (1930, *Fauna of British India. Birds* Vols. VII & VIII) and Ripley (1982, *Synopsis of the birds of India*) but many of the new names in these works are not included. A quick check revealed about 170 extra names of taxa described from India, including quite a number in books not in the listings in *Birds in books*, e.g., eight names in G. A. Scopoli (1786–1788) *Deliciae flora et faunae Insubricae*. It is difficult to track down the details of all these new names, especially those that are now long-forgotten synonyms, and it would, therefore, be good to have a published list of all the relevant names for South Asia (including those from periodicals), with details of where they were published and information on the type localities.

These minor criticisms do not detract from the importance of this work, which will be of great value to anyone with an interest in the birds of South Asia and the literature describing them.

—Tim Inskipp