

REVIEWS

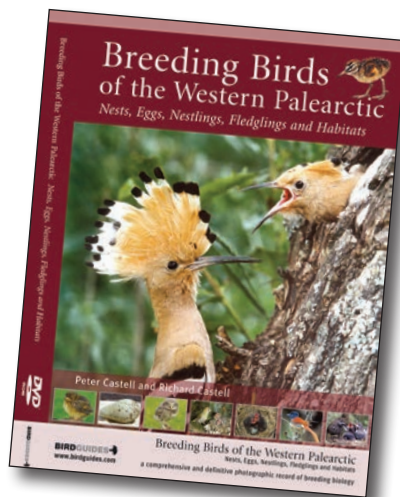
Breeding Birds of the Western Palearctic—Nests, Eggs, Nestlings and Habitats

Peter Castell & Richard Castell
BirdGuides Ltd. 2009.
DVD.
£99.95
ISBN 987-1-89811-050-5

Of the specialist publications on breeding birds of the Western Palearctic, this DVD is outstanding for its originality of concept and ambitious content. Never have the images of so many species been brought together with so much single-minded intensity, and covering such a large area. The DVD covers the birds' habitats, nests, eggs and young, with c9000 photographs of 736 of the 756 species considered to nest in the region.

Between one and 59 photographs cover the breeding of each of the 736 species, with text for all 756. For c100 British breeders, data from the British Trust for Ornithology's (BTO) Nest Record Scheme are also summarised. Twenty species are represented only with text, these ranging from Algerian Nuthatch *Sitta ledanti* to Abyssinian Roller *Coracias abyssinicus*. Many of them breed in the Middle East, especially Iran. Amongst the 20 are three woodpeckers, two accentors, a bee-eater and an owl.

The photographs, in a full species sequence, begin with habitat(s), followed by adult at or near its nest, then nests and eggs in the wild showing variations in construction, egg colour and size, and finally, chicks from newly hatched to fledglings or juveniles. Around 600 species are covered well, whereas others have museum pictures only of eggs, photographed by the Natural History Museum. Not only common birds are well represented. Scarce breeders receive the same level of attention. There are c500 species with adults photographed at or near their nest, or in breeding habitat. The photographs were taken over 40 years, and quality naturally varies but is consistently good and often, stunning.



The disc is very simple to use. Photographs are grouped by family or species, and the search facility quickly locates either. But the 'species search' should have extended to scientific names. I particularly liked the 'compare' function which enables you to examine chicks of similar species side by side (perhaps this could be expanded to show more than two images), helpful for comparing, eg, warbler chicks.

A modern passion for bird nesting and recording, untouched by the 'dead hand' of egg collecting, is not common, but can play a significant role in conservation, education and even taxonomy. The comprehensive introduction to the DVD begins on a personal note, an expression of the excitement that has propelled the authors on their odyssey through an impressive list of countries. There is an obvious sense of personal achievement with the results. The sheer effort involved in reaching some nests and their persistence in assembling the huge number of images can only be imagined.

The boundaries of the Western Palearctic are set out, but not debated. This work, as the authors' note, is probably not the forum to discuss whether the Arabian Tihama plain is Western Palearctic, or whether the boundary in Russia should be the Urals or the Yenisey river (but an expansive interpretation is adopted). The introduction also explains how photographs have been chosen to show

intraspecies variation and how this can operate across a species' range. A Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* can nest in a tree, in reeds or on the ground, and there are many other examples of birds varying their nest sites and building materials with local conditions. The purpose of displaying as many of these variations is to reduce misidentification of nests; all too easy, even for the experienced!

There are many egg collections in museums, and unfortunately a few still in private hands; obviously the chicks that would have hatched could not be described. This DVD goes a long way to correct this imbalance and the introduction concisely explains the general characteristics, differences and development between precocial and altricial chicks.

The value of responsible nest recording is introduced with particular reference to the BTO's Nest Record Scheme. Nest recording can help identify problems due to habitat loss, persecution and environmental pollution. Mention is made of the contribution that it can make to the Important Bird Area (IBA) initiative and the Arabian Breeding Bird Atlas (ABBA).

Dr Dave Leech outlines the use to which data collected for the Nest Record Scheme is put, especially in conjunction with the other BTO initiatives described in their own section of the introduction. The latter concludes with acknowledgements, separate from a list of 103 photographers of which c50% are from outside the UK. Information as to who is responsible for any photograph, its date and location, is available by clicking on the icon at the corner of the screen image.

Some images are from outside the region. Mongolia and Kazakhstan are now relatively accessible and have provided several species of Siberian taiga and forest steppe; south and central Africa a valuable Afrotropical contingent, while Canada has some examples of high Arctic species. Given the project's scale probably only a die-hard purist would insist that all 9000 images be from the Western Palearctic.

This DVD represents a coherent project with a strong aesthetic theme. When photographing, it is in the code of conduct to restrict time spent at the nest to the absolute minimum. It is really only with this DVD that the beauty, complexity and variety of so many

nests and their contents can be compared and appreciated.

There are 20 species of which the authors have been unable to locate wild-taken pictures or the eggs are unvarying white (see above). Some incomplete sequences comprise museum images of eggs alone. These may be species for which it is difficult to access an active nest without causing damage, such as woodpeckers. Other nests are just plain hard to find. Eleven gamebird species, of a total 27, have few images of nest site, contents and chick development. These range from Caucasian Snowcock *Tetragallus caucasicus* through See-see *Ammoperdix griseogularis*, Rock *Alectoris graeca*, Philby's *A. philbyi* and Arabian Partridges *A. melanocephala* to Black Francolin *Francolinus francolinus*. Of the 11, nests in the wild are shown for only two (nine are reliant on museum data and two of the four sets of chicks are in captivity). Only Caucasian Snowcock has an image of the nest site. Similarly, with nightjars, of the seven species breeding in the region, four are represented by museum eggs and none of young. Many of these poorly represented species breed in the Middle East, especially Iran. In contrast, some birds are very well covered, eg *Sylvia* warblers and buntings.

Zoos and private collections hold a wide variety of gamebirds, wildfowl and even waders, and the authors have used these, enabling them to assemble good sequences of chicks and juveniles that can be fairly accurately aged in captivity.

The photographs commence with habitat and, of course, there are never enough. I have found Woodlarks *Lullula arborea* breeding from near sea level on heaths in Britain to 2100 m asl in a crater in Turkey, and just about anywhere in between. More habitat pictures from a wide geographical range would be desirable and preferably should include the actual nest site. Helpfully, some habitat pictures have the nest location artificially highlighted.

The nest photographs contain many comprehensive examples of intraspecies egg variation, eg for Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*, Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*, Dunlin *Calidris alpina* and Royal Tern *Sterna maxima*. The latter species really shows the value of multiple images illustrating the striking differences in eggs and chicks at

a colony. The collage arrangement permits the full range of variation to be viewed simultaneously. Not only is variation within species shown but, using the 'compare' facility, eggs of different species that are similar can be viewed together. The key point is that you cannot always identify a nest without watching for an adult. I know from personal experience that lark species in rocky desert can easily trip you up.

I found the images of chicks most interesting, as I cannot recall such a range of photographs assembled for so many species. The authors have visited nests to photograph chicks ideally at the 'newly hatched' stage, and from then until fledging. This would have been impossible without huge dedication, bearing in mind that there is generally no firm information of when eggs, randomly found, will hatch. Re-scheduling your flight home, waiting for that all-important hatching event is not for the half-hearted.

Even intraspecifically, the plumage coloration of chicks is sufficiently variable to cause misidentification. Once again the 'compare' key is useful to check related species such as Common and Arctic Terns *Sterna hirundo/paradisaea* or Spotted and Little Crakes *Porzana porzana/parva*.

The species texts do not describe eggs or young, as the photographs show the important identification indicators. Instead, the texts describe breeding season, number of broods, clutch size, role of adults in nest duties, and incubation and nestling periods.

Without doubt this DVD matches hard work and determination with digital technology, to set a standard for similar efforts to come for different regions. It also should encourage others to fill in the gaps. But why spend almost £100 on it? On the international level this work really comes into its own. Additional to the nests and contents, photographs are images of adults of some very scarce Western Palearctic birds, which should appeal to any birdwatcher interested in breeding biology or not. Contributors to the BTO Nest Record Scheme will find the DVD very useful, and if you are interested in breeding biology, either in an amateur or professional capacity, it really has to be on your shopping list.

Bernard Pleasance

Important Bird Areas in Kazakhstan—Priority Sites for Conservation

Edited by SL Skylarenko, GR Welch & M Brombacher

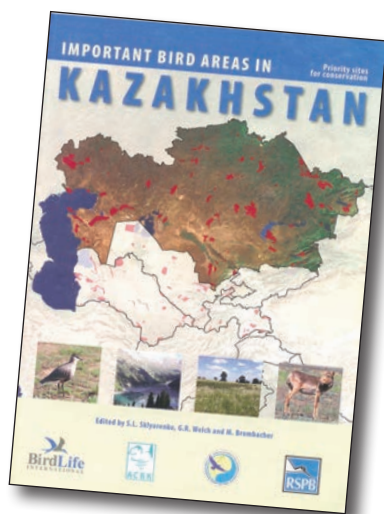
The Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan. 2008.

Softback. 318 pages, seven colour plates, 141 black-and-white photographs, 164 maps.

ISBN 9965–32–686-X

Available from NHBS Environment Bookstore (www.nhbs.com)

Kazakhstan is the ninth-largest country in the world with huge areas of natural habitat and 32 threatened bird species. Categorising the Important Bird Areas (IBAs) for a country the size of Western Europe must have been a daunting task given limited resources. The results are explained in the 66-page introduction dealing with the IBA rationale, data-gathering process, biomes in Central Asia (illustrated by the only colour photographs in the book), IBA criteria, and the ornithological importance of Kazakhstan. The inventory details 121 IBAs covering 149 862 km² (a lower percentage of land area than many other countries at 5.5%) and each IBA is covered in 1–2 pages detailing coordinates, area, habitats and tables of key species. Extra detail is provided for 'birds' and 'conservation issues', and there is a boundary map for each IBA. As part of the book's corporate design



the same blue is used extensively in the text headings and there is also a blue caste to the black-and-white photographs, which probably would have been more pleasing aesthetically if reproduced 'normally'.

There is an extensive bibliography for each IBA, and for the whole book, whilst the appendices contain a full list of 528 species and their relevant IBA criteria for Central Asia. Also useful are the maps showing the distribution of IBAs for 29 of the 32 threatened species, which will be welcomed by anyone wanting to see these species in the region.

Some quirks have arisen in the English names of birds, leaving aside taxonomic changes which have resulted in several species not being included such as Pale Martin *Riparia diluta*, with, amongst others, Himalayan Cuckoo for Oriental Cuckoo *Cuculus saturatus* and Rufous-streaked Accentor for Himalayan or Altai Accentor *Prunella himalayana* likely to confuse, although Pale-backed Pigeon for Eversmann's Dove *Columba evermannsi* is more 'acceptable'.

It was surprising not to see the marshes and spits on the south side of Alakol lake, with their tern and gull colonies including Relict Gull *Larus relictus*, and the extensive wetlands between lakes Alakol and Sasolkol, with their breeding White-headed Ducks *Oxyura leucocephala*, included as IBAs. It is inevitable that some potential IBA areas will have been missed, but it is surprising that the wetlands, saxual forest and salt desert south of the Ily river, from Kapchagay reservoir towards the Chinese border, have not been included given qualifying numbers of Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga*, Pale-backed Pigeon and Saxaul Sparrow *Passer ammodendri*. As is the nature of these inventories, additional sites and site extensions can be added later.

The ultimate judgement will be whether the IBAs are still viable in the long term and this publication should greatly facilitate this. It is a tremendous contribution to the conservation of bird biodiversity in Central Asia and, in the absence of anything else, will also serve as a *de facto* site guide for intending visitors.

Andrew Grieve

A Birdwatching Guide to Lesvos

Steve Dudley

Arlequin Press. 2009.

Softback. 272 pages, over 90 colour photographs and over 45 maps.

£19.99

ISBN 978-1-905268-06-1

Lying just off the west coast of Turkey, the Greek island of Lesvos has been a popular birding destination since the mid 1990s. What makes Lesvos so good are the diverse habitats including saltpans, freshwater pools, olive groves and deciduous woodland, and its position in the Aegean. Spring birding can be fantastic with impressive falls of migrants at times and, although fewer birders visit at this season, an autumn visit can be just as rewarding.

I made my first trip in 1994 and used the excellent site guide by Marjorie Williams (published 1992) and later the more comprehensive and well-illustrated book by Richard Brooks (published 1995). It's a shame Dudley does not mention either of these books, nor the considerable effort by Richard Brooks to really put Lesvos on the birding map. The updated (1998) edition of Richard's book and subsequent paper updates are heavily drawn upon.

Steve Dudley's site guide to Lesvos includes a useful 47-page introduction covering when to go, where to stay and an outline of the birding year. There is a detailed guide to >60 of the best birding areas, including many sites not previously published. There are over 45 maps, and although these are clear and well presented I'm not sure they will help you find your way, because the number of minor roads and rough tracks on Lesvos make interpreting any map difficult! The descriptive access information is generally good and the advice given under 'Areas to search' will help you make the most of your visit to a given site.

The checklist of species found on Lesvos runs to almost 40 pages and offers an excellent review of the status of species on the island. Steve has worked with the Hellenic Rarities Committee (HRC) to produce the checklist, which separates rarities into those accepted by HRC and those that are not. Many of the unusual records from the 1990s have not been formally accepted, partly due to the

lower profile of the HRC at the time. I was surprised to see that the three records of White-tailed Plover *Vanellus leucurus* have not been included (Brooks supplement) and can only assume Steve decided not to include them.

Lists covering butterflies, dragonflies, orchids, mammals will also be really useful for many visitors, as will be the list of scientific, Dutch and Greek bird names. The list of local place names and hints on pronunciation are useful although the title is missing at the top of the page.

There are >90 photographs showing sites, habitats and species, offering a good flavour of what the island has to offer. It could just be the quality of the paper used, but many of the photos do look rather 'flat'. The book suffers from a number of typographical errors throughout and there is a chunk of text missing on page 60, which is unfortunate. Another annoying mistake is the frequent use of "were" instead of "where". Such



minor points aside, the book provides an excellent up-to-date guide to Lesvos and will undoubtedly prove very useful for any visitor; thoroughly recommended.

Dawn Balmer

OSME NEWS

Geoff Welch

Conservation and Research Fund: change to sub-committee members

Due to pressure of work, Ramaz Gokhelashvili has had to retire from the committee and he is replaced by Vasil Ananian from Armenia. Vasil is a regular contributor to *Sandgrouse* and one of the most active birdwatchers in the Caucasus.

Increased funding for work in the United Arab Emirates

OSME is pleased to announce that additional funding for conservation and research projects in the United Arab Emirates, and occasionally elsewhere in the Arabian peninsula, is now available thanks to the establishment of a partnership with the Emirates Natural History Group (Abu Dhabi). Applications for funding will be considered following the existing CRF guidelines—see the OSME website www.osme.org

for details. This partnership provides an opportunity to support more small projects in the region or, where of outstanding need or importance, larger projects. Recipients will be expected to provide a report suitable for publication in the Group's monthly newsletter *Focus* or in its annual refereed journal *Tribulus* and, if possible, to give a presentation to the Group if in the Emirates.

The OSME Region List of Bird Taxa (ORL)

We are aware that not all of our members have reliable and fast access to the internet and therefore the ORL team has produced a printed version of the List that is available from OSME, price £8 including post and packing. To order a copy, please contact OSME Sales, c/o The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL, UK (sales@osme.org).