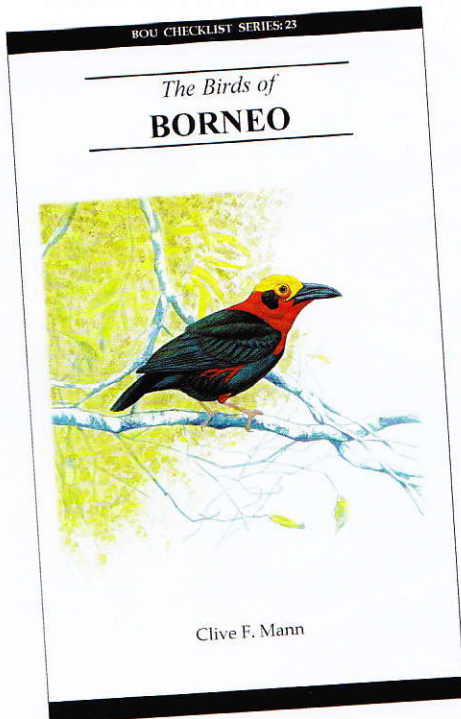


Reviews

The Birds of Borneo. By Clive F. Mann. 2008. BOU Checklist Series No. 23. British Ornithologists' Union, Peterborough. xvi + 440 pp., 68 colour plates. Hardback. ISBN 978-0-907446-28-6. Price £50.

Borneo—land of headhunters, orangutans and where, in 1855, Alfred Russel Wallace wrote his 'On the Law Which has Regulated the Introduction of Species' (also known as the 'Sarawak Law'), detailing observations on the geographical and geological distributions of species and foreshadowing his later paper that laid one of the foundations of modern evolutionary thinking—is the world's third largest island (after Greenland and New Guinea). It was only discovered by westerners in the early sixteenth century, and to this day evokes wilderness and adventure. Borneo is divided among three nations, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia, with the latter being divided into the two separate administrative states of Sabah and Sarawak. The ornithology of Borneo has been relatively well covered, firstly by Bertram Smythies's *The Birds of Borneo*, first published in 1960 with a major revised edition in 1999, and more recently, albeit limited to Sabah, by Frederick Sheldon and colleagues with *Ornithology of Sabah* published in 2001. Any book written on the birds of Borneo has to be compared against these standard references.



The first part of Mann's introduction presents a concise history of human presence on Borneo, the island's geography and climate, its main vegetation types, some notes on animals other than birds, and an overview of ornithological exploration of the island. The second part is devoted to birds, covering taxonomy, species richness, endemism and bird conservation. He gives a good overview, necessary to appreciate the complexity of the island's avifauna. The gazetteer, list of references and indexes to scientific and English names at the end provide a comprehensive guide for the reader.

The Systematic Checklist itself gives detailed descriptions of the geographic distribution, habitat and breeding (resident species only), and taxonomic notes where relevant, of 630 species of birds. Almost 400 of these species are residents (41–47 island endemics and ~230 endemic to the Sundaic region). For most species, the bulk of each account comprises the localities where the species has been recorded, subdivided into seven geographical regions (Sarawak, Brunei, Sabah and the four Indonesian provinces of East, Central, South and West Kalimantan). Depending on the knowledge we have of the species, the entries range from a meagre seven lines for Dulit Partridge and Rajah Scops Owl from the northern mountains to two pages for the bird-catcher's favourite, and hence increasingly rare, Straw-headed Bulbul. Although I was aware of the deficiency, the checklist reinforced the notion of how little is known on the breeding biology of South-East Asian birds. Over twenty times I counted '*Breeding: No records; nest and eggs are unknown*' and for probably about a quarter of all residents the data we have refer to single observations of breeding, the condition of the gonads, or the observation of fledglings. Many of the endemics, widespread or restricted, rare or common, remain virtually unknown.

Mann's experience with Borneo stems largely from a ten-year stint working in Brunei in the north-western part of the island. My own experiences are largely from working in the Indonesian part of the island and while reviewing the book I was eager to find differences and similarities between Mann's and my own experience. Overall, I felt that the checklist covered the less-explored Indonesian provinces well, and the only section where Indonesia was not covered was in the colour plates illustrating the different habitat types, as these were all taken in Brunei, Sabah and Sarawak. Compared to Smythies's latest edition, the emphasis was more on mainland Borneo with little information on the offshore island groups. No matter how much effort one puts into researching a regional fauna and no matter how meticulous one is, there will always be data that are missed and minor mistakes, but I found few clear omissions. Even the spelling of (old) Dutch references was

generally correct—not a minor feat even for those that do speak the language.

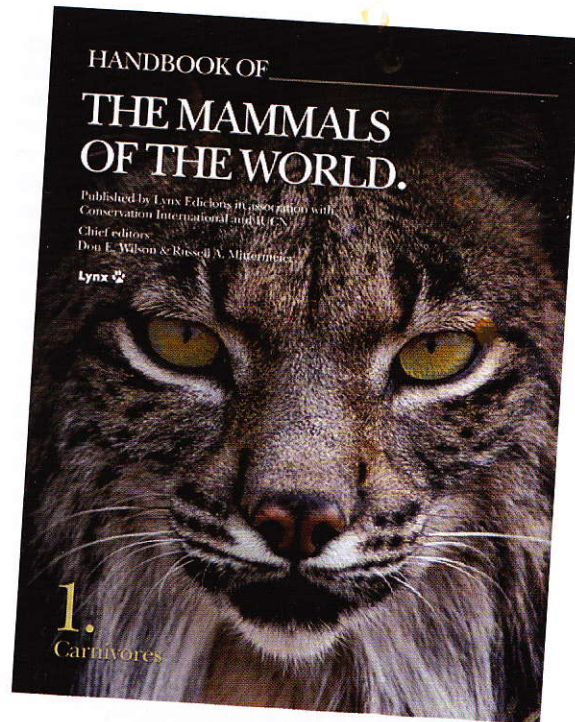
I was, however, not impressed by Mann's discussion of the Biological versus the Phylogenetic Species Concept (PSC), erroneously stating for instance that under the PSC we require knowledge of the interbreeding of contiguously distributed subspecies in order for a taxonomic decision to be made. One could argue that under the PSC the retention of the ability to interbreed is simply a symplesiomorphic character state and does not indicate a genealogical relationship (as attested by the fact that species that hybridise are not necessarily sister taxa). Interestingly, one of the most accessible reviews of species concepts and systematics I have seen was actually published in an earlier BOU Checklist (No 13: *The birds of the Cape Verde Islands*) and it would be good if other BOU checklist authors would take notice.

With BOU checklists available for the islands to the east (Wallace, published in 1986), north-east (Philippines, 1991) and south-west (Sumatra, 1988), this checklist has successfully filled a natural geographical gap. The publication of the checklist for the islands to the south (Java, Bali and Madura) has been in preparation since the late 1980s, but with the passing of one of its intended authors, J. H. Becking, earlier this year we may have to wait a bit longer to see the completion of this final instalment. But even without this, the knowledge we have on the geographical distribution of the birds in the region is far greater than what Wallace had available to him when he was contemplating his Sarawak Law—and the patterns are more complex and less clear-cut, even within islands. Had he had available to him the wealth of information presented by Mann, Wallace's Sarawak Law would have been an even greater puzzle to unravel.

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Vincent Nijman



Handbook of the Mammals of the World. Volume 1: Carnivores. By Don E. Wilson and Russell A. Mittermeier (editors). 2009, Lynx Edicions, Barcelona. 728pp, 36 colour plates, 561 colour photographs, 258 distribution maps. Hardback. ISBN 978-84-96553-49-1. Price: £145.00.

Even before the monumental *Handbook of the Birds of the World* has finished, the first volume of *Handbook of the Mammals of the World* is out. Mammals are even more threatened than are birds, but—bar a few icons—have much less accessible, reliable, reader-grabbing information than do birds. A few minutes with this hefty tome (as bulky as an *HBW*) riveted me to the photographic splendours: even the most single-minded birder could surely not remain untouched by this visual feast.

The text is something of a come-down, at least for Oriental taxa. Most of the ten families (seals, sea-lions and walrus, although unquestionably in Carnivora, are excluded) in our region have fair cullings—both family and species level—of recent international English-language academic literature. But 'no information' and its near-synonyms appear far too often where material exists in regional and/or non-English-language journals, survey reports, etc. Most accounts have little to suggest deep personal knowledge of the animals and their haunts, exemplified by wide-eyed remarks like 'in Vietnam, a Binturong [*Arctictis binturong*] was found in a snare trap' (p. 228), and '...with snare trapping found even in some protected areas [of South-East Asia]' (p. 211)... whereas Binturongs are surely commonly and widely snared,