

useful feature. The addition of a protective plastic outer cover is practical, and the cover design illustrating a pair of Congo Peafowl must have been especially chosen to taunt us into finding this beauty in real life. The 400 updated range maps include the latest distribution information, and I am impressed at how rapidly the authors were able to commission illustrations of recently described species and incorporate other taxonomic changes. Some forms previously split have been lumped into single species, such as Degodi Lark into Gillett's Lark, and the forest robins of West Africa; in many other cases, splits have been accepted and are now covered as separate species, for example Tropical Shearwater, Hartert's Camaroptera and Atlas Flycatcher. I would recommend that the taxonomy of the widely accepted IOC official birdlist be followed for the next edition.

As with any complex work such as this book, other criticisms and minor errors could be pointed out, but this is a work in progress and I am already looking forward to the third edition.

ADAM RILEY

### THE BIGGEST TWITCH

Alan Davies & Ruth Miller

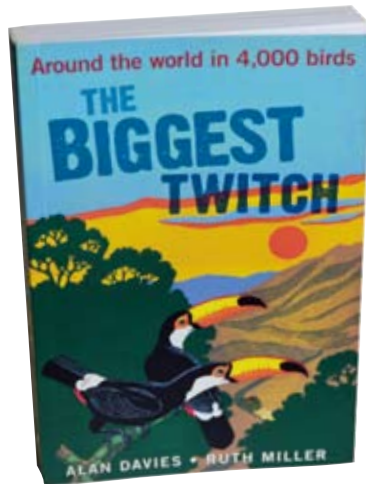
Softcover, 301 pages; R225.

ISBN 978-1-4081-2387-4

Christopher Helm

This entertaining book describes how two British birders decided to take what they call 'a gap year for oldies' (not that they are particularly old – more of a midlife-crisis year) to go birding around the world. This notion was hijacked by Iain Campbell, the co-founder of Tropical Birding, who encouraged Alan and Ruth to undertake his long-standing dream of a year-long race to see as many birds as possible. Their aim was to break Jim Clements's record, set in 1989, of 3 662 species in a calendar year. They chose 2008 (giving them a bonus day of 29 February) and sold their house to finance the venture.

As you might expect, the book is a non-stop sequence of places and species. I found it a bit much to take in at a single sitting and preferred to read a chapter at a time. Each describes a separate country and the daring duo race through 27 of them. After surviving a year in each



other's pockets, they couldn't agree on how to tackle writing the book, so they took turns to write successive chapters. Both have a pleasant style and there is enough anecdote to leaven the breathless list of birds.

Much of the year was spent on guided birding trips, but they also tackled some areas by themselves. They made two sorties to Africa, adding 713 species on a trip in February–March that took in Ethiopia and Ghana, with a day's birding in Kenya en route, and then a further 379 species in South Africa, Namibia, Malawi and Zambia in August–October. The trip to Zambia and Malawi was a bit chaotic and I couldn't help thinking they would have been better off visiting Uganda or Rwanda. As is often the case, reading the sections you know most about reveals the odd weakness. Did they really have hundreds of Yellow-nosed Albatrosses off the Cape, or was that influenced by Alan's sea-sickness? And why the long tale about chasing Wattled Cranes in Ethiopia's Bale Mountains, but no mention of the area's two prime attractions, Rouget's Rail and Spot-breasted Lapwing?

Alan and Ruth broke the old record in Australia on 31 October and went on to amass 4 341 species by the end of their epic year. With hindsight and a bigger budget, the total could have been closer to 5 000, but you have to admire their endurance and perseverance. The book is ideal for the armchair birder and it makes for interesting reading if you are planning to visit one of the areas covered. It could do with a map or two and some statistics on the cost (both monetary and in terms of their carbon footprint). But the book has a strong conservation message and the event was used to raise funds for the Mindo Cloud Forest Foundation.

PETER RYAN

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