



Birds of Botswana

Peter Hancock & Ingrid Weiersbye

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Maun-based birder and conservationist Pete Hancock is ideally placed to summarise information about the distribution, abundance and habitat preferences of Botswana's birds. By teaming up with well-known bird artist Ingrid Weiersbye (*Roberts Bird Guide* and *Roberts Geographical Variation of Southern African Birds*), Hancock has produced a comprehensive field guide to Botswana's 597 bird species, including two added while the book was in press: Red-necked Buzzard and Pied Wheatear. It also lists seven species that are likely to turn up in the country at some stage, but doesn't mention vagrants recorded just over the country's border (for example, Grasshopper Buzzard and Little Ringed Plover, both from Zimbabwe's Hwange National Park).

The book follows the usual field guide format. There is a brief introduction providing an overview of Botswana,

including its biogeography and major vegetation types, a summary of key birding sites based on the country's IBAs, and a guide to using the book. The bulk of the text comprises the species accounts, arranged in a sequence that combines aspects of the new, genetic-based taxonomy and the more familiar Wetmore sequence. Thus gamebirds and ducks appear at the front, after ostriches, with a more traditional sequence for the remaining bird orders, except parrots, which are placed just before the passerines (but the falcons, sister to these groups, are left with the other diurnal raptors). The sequence within the passerines mostly reflects the new understanding of their affinities.

Each family is introduced with a brief overview and there are group headings for some speciose families that comprise several discrete groups (for example, raptors, and cuckoos and coucals). Nomenclature follows the IOC list (www.worldbirdnames.org), so differs from the commonly used southern African names in a few respects (for instance it uses Ring-necked rather than Cape Turtle Dove). A valuable addition is the provision of Setswana names for the more common species, with their meaning described for some species.

With fewer species to cover than southern African guides, the authors have the luxury to provide a fair amount of information for each species. Most spreads only cover between two and four species. The species accounts describe size (in centimetres and inches, the latter presumably a nod to the US-based publisher), identification criteria, calls, abundance and distribution, habitat, habits and conservation status. Most pages use all the space available for text, but there is scope to provide additional

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information on some species, notably many of the raptors.

The species accounts are accompanied by range maps, which show two levels of abundance as well as vagrant records. Ranges are coloured to differentiate residents from breeding and non-breeding migrants. There are also the now familiar calendar bars to show seasonal occurrence and breeding phenology for the regularly occurring species. The artwork supports the text, showing a range of plumages, major geographical variants, flight views and feather detail insets (for example, pipit tail patterns). The plates are nicely laid out, but some are a little sparse.

As Seretse Khama says in his foreword, this guide should help to promote avitourism to Botswana. Compared to the well-established southern African field guides, the main attraction for visitors is the simplicity introduced by losing 400 species that don't occur in the country. However, to the more experienced southern African birder, the real value lies in Pete Hancock's text. It provides a wealth of information on Botswana's birds, some of which isn't even captured in *Roberts VII*. For example, I was intrigued to learn that Blue Cranes used to breed at Magdikgadi Pans until 2000. The book will be a welcome addition to any keen southern African birder's library.

PETER RYAN

