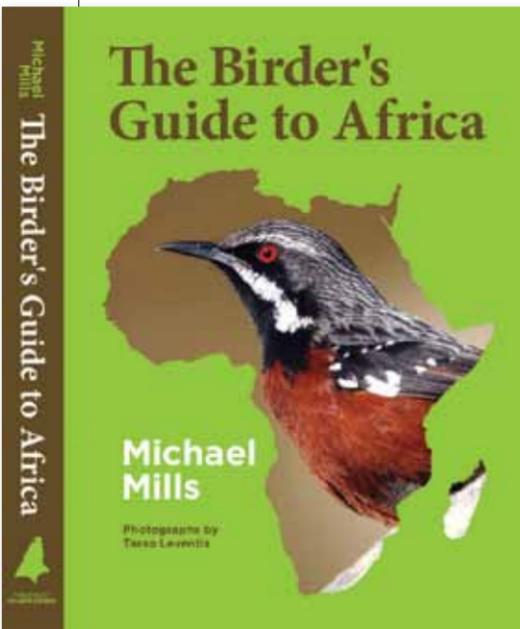


on the shelf



The Birder's Guide to Africa

Michael Mills
Photographs by Tasso Leventis

Go-Away-Birding, Cape Town
ISBN 978-0-620-71725-0
Softcover, 544 pages
R450. Available from the author at e-mail goawaybirding@gmail.com, or from the BirdLife South Africa shop in Johannesburg.

It's not often that a bird book comes out that breaks the mould, but this is one such publication. Mike Mills spent three years distilling his vast experience of birding across Africa into a novel hybrid between a trip planner, Lonely Planet guide and an annotated checklist. It contains everything you need to know (and more) if you are contemplating an African birding trip.

The book's primary aim is to assist birders to decide how best to get to grips with the dizzying array of 2792 species in 142 families spread across 68 countries and territories: 50 in continental Africa and 18 island groups that fall within the broader African

region. Africa may not have the largest number of birds in the world, but it is home to more nations than any other continent. This book helps birders decide where to focus their efforts.

Mike shows his scientific roots early on in the book, with an analysis of which countries are the most important to visit, depending on your birding goals. Using objective criteria, he ranks countries in terms of their relative importance for world listers, budget birders, balanced birders, leisure birders, and explorer birders. Which of course begs the question, what kind of birder are you?

World listers want to see as many species as possible and travel the world in pursuit of this goal. Budget birders aspire to be world listers, but lack the resources to indulge their hobby to the same extent. Balanced birders want to see lots of birds, but don't want to endure excessive hardships and are also happy to sample other natural and cultural attractions. Leisure birders are even more laid-back – birds are just part of a holiday involving good accommodation, food and other attractions. Finally, explorer birders are those intrepid souls who enjoy nothing more than heading

off into unknown territory in search of new or little-known birds.

THIS IS AN ESSENTIAL BOOK FOR AFRICAN BIRDERS AND ARMCHAIR TRAVELLERS. I'M CONFIDENT IT WILL ACHIEVE ITS OVERARCHING GOAL OF PROMOTING BIRDING IN AFRICA

Unsurprisingly, South Africa ranks highly for all categories except explorer birders, coming in at number one for budget, balanced and leisure birders, and just pipped for the top spot by Madagascar for world listers. That is all very well, but it doesn't help too much if you're fortunate enough to be based in South Africa and have seen most of its amazing birds. It



would be great to have a contingent analysis that advises where next to go birding, based on regions you have already covered or which birds you have already seen. Perhaps an idea for an app?

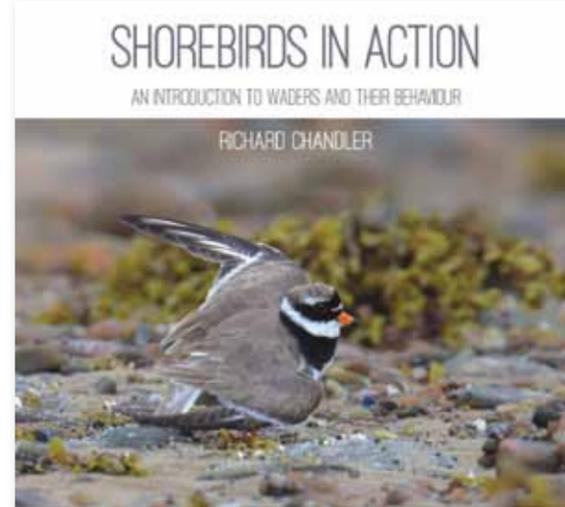
Having decided where to go, you can peruse the short overviews that distil the essential information for each of the 68 countries and island groups. Each has a section on birds and birding that outlines bird diversity, lists all the endemic and near-endemic species, describes the major habitats and advises the best time to visit. The travel section covers safety, ease of access and movement within the country, and summarises other attractions, geography and climate. Each account ends with a list of useful birding resources, including field guides, sound recordings, apps and site guides.

Some people may find the focus on numbers of species a bit narrow and Mike acknowledges the recent trend to chase higher levels of avian diversity. The second quarter of the book is a tribute to Africa's bird families, supplemented by a wealth of Tasso Leventis's photographs. It's a fascinating overview, listing the diversity in each family and the number of species found in Africa. Genetic evidence continues to reveal surprising family-level diversity, with the number of bird families almost doubling over the past few decades. More than half of these occur in Africa and 33 are endemic to the region.

The second half of the book is an up-to-date annotated checklist of the birds of Africa and adjacent islands. Each species' range is indicated and the sites identified where it is most easily seen. Although Mike largely followed the IOC World Bird Names list, he has tracked all the recent splits and lumps and highlights potential future taxonomic changes. This is a massive undertaking and a key resource for anyone interested in African birds. Introduced species and unconfirmed records are listed at the end, after lists of references and useful birding websites.

This is an essential book for African birders and armchair travellers. I'm confident it will achieve its overarching goal of promoting birding in Africa and thus help to conserve African birds and their habitats.

PETER RYAN



Shorebirds in Action

An introduction to waders and their behaviour
Richard Chandler

Whittles Publishing, Dunbeath, Scotland
ISBN 978-184995-355-9
Softcover, 248 pages
£21.95 or \$27.95; order online

Well-known bird photographer Richard Chandler has been obsessed with shorebirds for more than 40 years and has published two guides to the shorebirds of the northern hemisphere. His latest offering is a lavishly illustrated survey of shorebirds globally, with photographs of more than three-quarters of the world's 243 shorebird species. The text is divided into seven chapters, with the first and longest chapter introducing the 16 families that comprise the group. The

more traditional shorebirds are given preferential treatment, with only brief accounts of the buttonquails, sheathbills, coursers, phalaropes and pratincoles.

The remaining six chapters highlight different aspects of shorebird biology. Chapter 2 deals with plumages and moults, chapter 3 with feeding and diet, chapter 4 with comfort behaviours and structural adaptations (foot structure, salt glands, etc.), chapter 5 with breeding and territorial behaviour, chapter 6 with migration and chapter

7 with communal activities and predator avoidance. The text is easy to read and reasonably up to date, with lists of selected references at the end of each chapter. To my mind, the main omission is a discussion of the threats facing shorebirds, especially given the parlous conservation status of many long-distance migrants. There is only passing mention of stop-over habitat loss and degradation in the Yellow Sea and Delaware Bay, USA.

But the text is mainly an excuse for the many images that grace the book, complementing the various topics covered in each chapter. Image quality ranges from good to excellent, with extended captions containing useful information on shorebird biology. This visual feast of shorebirds is bound to be appreciated by anyone with an interest in these fascinating birds.

PETER RYAN

