

Reviews

Birds of Hertfordshire

By K. W. Smith, C. W. Dee, J. D. Fearnside & M. Illett

Hertfordshire Natural History Society, 2015

Hbk, 293pp; many colour photographs

ISBN 978-0-9931217-0-8, £39.00

A cover painting by Alan Harris, showing (at least) 13 bird species at a Hertfordshire wetland in spring, is an uplifting entry point to this new avifauna for Hertfordshire, and one that immediately entices the reader to explore further. And the rest of the book does not disappoint: this is a most attractive atlas, with bright, colourful and varied page layouts that combine an appealing mix of colour photographs, maps, tables and graphics with a typeset that is clear but not too small or large.

This is the third county avifauna for Hertfordshire and its production was inspired by fieldwork for the recent national bird atlas. Having decided at an early stage to produce a tetrad-based county atlas alongside the national project, Hertfordshire has led the field in providing online maps to show the work in progress as the project developed. This was also the third county tetrad atlas for Hertfordshire, which means that there is now an impressive panorama of bird data for this landlocked county. The completed maps are available (free) online; a wise decision, since it would be unrealistic to print maps from three breeding atlases, plus winter maps from the current survey and any indications of abundance or change between the atlases. All these aspects can be explored at www.hertsatlas.org.uk.

The book opens with interesting and relevant chapters describing the county's landscape and habitats, an ornithological history of Hertfordshire, and bird surveys and recording in the county. The last shows just how much fieldwork has been undertaken over the last 50 years or so and the value these local surveys have provided. Moving on to the core of the book, the species accounts, two points immediately come to mind. One is the overriding feeling of quality mentioned earlier. The other is the brevity of the text. Most county avifaunas go into detail about individual records or where commoner birds are to be found. This can be useful but can also be a dull read! Does anyone really read them all? With this Hertfordshire book, the reader could easily read everything printed within the covers of the book, page by page, or dip in as they wished, yet would still feel they had learnt something interesting and useful after each sitting. With so much information available on the internet these days, and a declining market for expensive books, I think

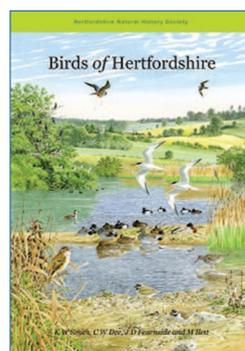
this is a wise decision. A full reference and explanation of status may interest some, but most folk are looking for less,

or perhaps for an introduction to the birds of an area, and I find it hard to imagine how this could have been done better than it has here.

The selection of maps and graphics for each species are different, depending on what is considered interesting to share. Thus the Robin *Erithacus rubecula* occurs in every tetrad, so no tetrad map is included in the book (it's still there on the website); instead there are maps of abundance in both breeding season and winter and a chart showing the BBS trend for the county. The results have shown a higher abundance in the middle and south of the county and while this is pointed out, no explanation is offered. For the Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla* there are maps of recent distribution in both seasons, a map of breeding season abundance, and a graph of the county BBS trend. For a number of species where there have been large changes in distribution in the three atlas surveys, such as Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*, Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* and Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra* (all declining) and Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* (increasing but where the use of breeding habitat has changed from wet grasslands to arable crops), maps from all breeding surveys are included. Some other species accounts are enhanced by graphics from, for example, ringing recoveries, annual or monthly numbers, arrival dates or WeBS counts.

County population estimates are presented in species headers alongside the GB estimates from Musgrove *et al.* 2013 (*Brit. Birds* 106: 64–100). These are based on estimates prepared for the previous county atlas but scaled for recent changes or improved knowledge. Some avifaunas and atlases shy away from putting numbers to their local birds but I think it is helpful for readers to better understand the county and to assess future changes.

Hertfordshire is fortunate in having a long ornithological history on which to draw. A chapter describing changes in the avifauna provides perspective over the last 40 years, for which there is much information, as detailed in the 12-page



review of bird surveys and recording in the introductory chapters. The book concludes with appendices and a site gazetteer, maps for selected sites, the full Hertfordshire List and selected records for 2013, bringing the book as up to date as can be possible for such an extensive review.

While I'm not familiar with Hertfordshire, I am keenly interested in where birds occur, when and why. Having spent several hours with this book I feel much better informed about all manner of

things; that, coupled with the visual appeal means that I love this book! This is now the county avifauna of choice for me when looking for inspiration and ideas on local surveys and reporting their results to a wide audience. Anyone who lives in or near Hertfordshire, or knows the county, must get a copy. And I strongly advise anyone else interested in county avifaunas or atlases to do the same.

Mark Holling

A Birdwatching Guide to North East Germany and its Baltic Coast

By Roger White

Published privately, 2012

Pbk, 147pp; colour photos and maps

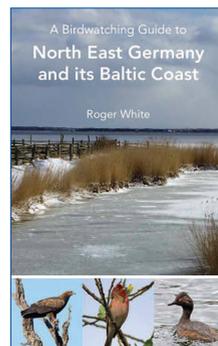
ISBN 978-0-9571695-1-7, £17.95

Germany has many fantastic birding sites, but most are not on the radar of foreign birdwatchers, since information on birds and where to watch them in languages other than German is almost non-existent. Roger White published his first book, covering Brandenburg and Berlin (see *Brit. Birds* 105: 489), in 2012. His second deals with the federal state Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, in north-east Germany. The whole area is divided into four subregions ('rectangles'), each covering between nine and 31 sites. Although the book concentrates on the Baltic Sea coast, many excellent inland sites are also included, as is the island of Fehmarn (which is actually part of Schleswig-Holstein, although from a birdwatching perspective it makes sense to include it here). For each site there is a map, a short introduction, notes on access and a description of the bird species to be expected. For the sites that I have visited, the information has been thoroughly researched and is well presented, although some maps are printed at a rather small scale and lack GPS-coordinates. Some site descriptions only scratch the surface of the potential of the sites (e.g. Grüner Brink on Fehmarn, or sea-watching on the north coast of Rügen and Darß), but this may be rather subjective. A list of the reg-

ularly occurring bird species (including German names) is also included.

Mecklenburg-Vorpommern is a huge area with many great birding sites. The Baltic Sea coast is excellent for migration and hosts one of the largest roosts of Common Cranes *Grus grus* in Europe with up to c. 70,000 birds present in September and October. Coastal and inland wetlands hold significant numbers of breeding and roosting waterbirds, some of them rare in Britain, including Little Crane *Porzana parva*, Whiskered *Chlidonia hybrida* and White-winged Black Terns *C. leucopterus*. Add in passerines like River Warbler *Locustella fluviatilis* and Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia*, various woodpeckers in the forests, White-tailed *Haliaeetus albicilla* and at some sites Lesser Spotted Eagles *Aquila pomarina* and you have an excellent birding destination. Roger White has presented this region extremely well to English-speaking birdwatchers. So, buy the book and come to visit – you will not be disappointed!

Jochen Dierschke



Birds

Edited by Mavis Pilbeam

British Museum Press, 2015

Pbk, 96pp; 48 colour illustrations

ISBN 978-0-7141-5112-0, £9.99

Every human culture has made images and poems about the birds people live amongst. Most attribute meaning to their avifaunas beyond their factual truth. Birds live vividly in our imaginations and our dreams, and artists the world over have

been drawn to what we have made of birds as much as what they are themselves.

The British Museum has a large collection of

