

## Book Review

### **An Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT, Volume 3. Eastern Spinebill to Common Greenfinch**

By Richard M. Cooper, Ian A.W. McAllen, Christopher C.P. Brandis and Brian R. Curtis, 2020.  
New South Wales Bird Atlassers Inc, Woolgoolga, 762 pp., numerous tables, graphs and maps.  
Hardback, A4 format, \$170, ISBN 9780957704756

The third and final volume of the Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT (Atlas) is now available. The accolades for this monumental work by NSW Bird Atlassers are many. Volume 2 was awarded the Royal Zoological Society of NSW Whitley Award for the Best Zoological Resource published on any Australian fauna or flora in 2016.

The methodology of documentation and analysis of data from the two previous volumes is unchanged in volume 3. For each species, there are maps, graphs and tables summarising the reported distribution, breeding distribution, seasonal and historic range changes, together with monthly breeding records and monthly and annual reporting rates. The text provides a summary of what is known about the occurrence, distribution, breeding biology, movements, history and current status of each species. The analysis is based on an audited database of over six million records and although the data has a 2006 cut-off, the accompanying text references sources as recent as 2019. The strength of the Atlas lies in its 20+ year record of change which provides a multi-generational time frame for assessing population trends using IUCN listing criteria. Some excellent photographs accompany the text.

The final volume includes 10 supplementary species that were not included in volumes 1 and 2. These include two new records for NSW, Aleutian Tern and Eyrean Grasswren. The accompanying text indicates that the Manning Estuary appears to be a unique wintering habitat for Aleutian Tern. The South Island Pied Oystercatcher, which has been present on Stockton Beach in recent years, is also included. Many Hunter Region bird observers will have recently twitched these two species. The 13 endemic species of Lord Howe Island are included in this volume as are 79 authenticated NSW vagrant species. There are no statistics for the latter two groups. The list of supplementary and vagrant species includes information that will be of particular interest to pelagic birders. A list of

literature and manuscript sources for historical data is included along with over 1,600 reference sources.

Sadly, the overarching message of the Atlas is the decline of avian species in NSW and ACT. The three volumes include 573 species that are known to have existed in NSW and ACT and the western Tasman Sea. The completion of the third volume has allowed analysis of the status of all included species. After excluding species that no longer exist in mainland NSW, vagrants, occasional visiting seabirds, non-breeding trans-equatorial migrants and human-introduced species, 393 species remain that are either resident or regional migrants. Of these 203 species (52%) exhibit a decline in reporting rate between 1986 and 2006. Statistically, this decline is highly significant for 162 species and significant for 37 species. Only 33 of the declining species are listed as threatened in NSW. While many of the declining species are classified as least concern under IUCN criteria (i.e. large range and population), the decline represents an irrefutable record of the continuing loss of habitat for these species.

The overwhelming majority of species in Volume 3 that exhibit declines in reporting rate are woodland birds, some of which we tend to take for granted, e.g. Golden Whistler, Grey Shrike-thrush, Australian Magpie, Grey Fantail, Willie Wagtail, Australian Raven, Magpie Lark and Eastern Yellow Robin.

Those species exhibiting an increase in reporting rate tend to be large, noisy, aggressive birds that have adapted successfully to the changed Australian landscape, e.g. Blue-faced Honeyeater, Australasian Figbird, Grey Butcherbird and Pied Butcherbird. Two uncommon cryptic species with increased reporting rates are Bassian Thrush and Russet-tailed Thrush.

There is some good news in the Atlas. Ten threatened species, some of which have healthy

populations in the Hunter Region appear to have increased in number over the Atlas period: i.e. Wompoo Fruit-Dove, Black-necked Stork, Eastern Osprey, Square-tailed Kite, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, Australian Pied Oystercatcher, Sooty Oystercatcher, Superb Parrot, Powerful Owl and Eastern Grass Owl.

The Atlas tells us our record of environmental management is poor. We are experiencing increasing urbanization, agricultural development, altered water flows and poor water management as we attempt to meet the insatiable demands of our increasing population. As a result, the habitat of our birds is subject to ongoing destruction, degradation and fragmentation. Now climate change has been added as an additional threat.

Although the Atlas contains information that is not included in field guides, it may not appeal as a reference work to the average bird enthusiast. It will mainly appeal to more technically minded ornithologists, conservation organisations, wildlife managers, environmental consultants, scientists and government agencies. The quantitative data will

undoubtedly be used to facilitate more cost-effective, targeted research and conservation management.

Unfortunately, the Atlas is unlikely to end up on the desk of those elected individuals who are charged with the responsibility of protecting our environment. Instead it is up to us to bring the results of the Atlas to their attention and demand effective action to protect our native species and their habitat.

I encourage all readers to carefully consider the section on declining annual trends on pages 4 and 5 of the Atlas, volume 3. In the words of the authors: "Overall this Atlas demonstrates that the habitat of many birds is now seriously affected by influences that will mean many species cannot survive the next century. The long-term outlook for many is bleak."

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