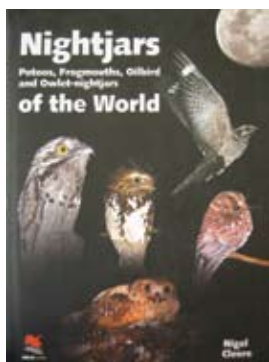


Review



Nightjars, potoos, frogmouths, oilbird and owllet-nightjars of the world

Author: Nigel Cleere

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In forty years of tramping over India's wilderness, no order of birds has caused me so much consternation (and indeed joy) than the cryptically colored *Caprimulgiformes*—the nightjars (*Caprimulgidae*), and allied species. By day these nocturnal, hardly-seen, obscurely known species lurk hidden in tropical forests, or grassland, pretending to be tree-stumps, or leaf litter. To compound their esoteric behaviour, they all look similar, making them almost as difficult to identify as leaf-warblers (*Phylloscopus* spp.).

Therefore Nigel Cleere's *Nightjars of the World* comes as a great relief to those of us who have lain awake all night trying to figure out which nightjar we had a fleeting glimpse of. This path-breaking book covers 135 species of nightjars and 17 species of frogmouths (*Podargidae*). Even though the Indian birdwatcher, has to deal with only 11 nightjars and two frogmouths, I would strongly urge, those who can afford it, to buy it for the sheer pleasure of holding such a worthy tome.

Caprimulgus means 'goat-sucker' in Greek, as the ancients thought these birds, fed off the udders of livestock under cover of darkness, and so spread disease amongst their herds. The Indian birder, for whom this review is meant, has no such illusions, being occupied by the big question of how to differentiate between the 'Indian' and the 'Grey'. In recent times my friend Pam Rasmussen has (quite rightly) tried to bring some 'sanity' amongst this already confusing family. She has split the Large-tailed— earlier called Long-tailed and created Jerdon's of the southern peninsula. The Andaman Nightjar has been promoted to full species status, but beware; there still exists an 'Indian Jungle Nightjar' as well as a 'Little Indian Nightjar.' All this goes to prove how essential Cleere's book is!

The two frogmouths, found in India, are much easier to identify, only because they exist in separate parts of India, with the Sri Lankan Frogmouth being a peninsular bird, and Hodgson's, having scattered records from Eaglenest, Namdapha, and Bhutan in north-eastern India.

Most of us see nightjars in the murky evening light, or occasionally stumble upon them sitting motionless during the

day, but they rarely afford a good look. Using vocalisation in identifying these birds is perhaps the best way to identify these birds and in the past most birders have depended on the calls for positive identification. Having said that, for nine species of (non-Indian) nightjars, vocalizations are yet to be recorded!

Cleere's book starts with a long and detailed introduction. His aim is "to present an easy-to-use guide to help identify nightjars and related birds by providing a tool to help identify [this family] ... it is hoped to stimulate greater interest in finding, observing, and studying these phantoms of the night." The introduction, with broad distribution maps, discusses, *inter alia*, plumage and structure, the challenges of taxonomy and biology. The foreword by conservation expert Nigel Collar too makes for fascinating reading.

Over 550 photographs, (taken by 190 photographers) add great value to the book. As Collar says in his foreword, "artwork usually trumps photography to illustrate field guides and handbooks ... but, on the other hand, if a publisher is so generous as to provide multiple shots of the species in question, a whole new dimension to the business of field identification opens up". Every species is illustrated, mostly with images of live birds, but in case where such photographs do not exist, photos of museum skins have been used. Interestingly these include five species that have not been seen since they were first discovered.

There has been some criticism that the text is too sketchy, and while this book does not provide detailed descriptions, the range map, identification pointers, and vocalization are enough to help the reader find his way. The exquisite photographs are of course a great help.

The book itself is a joy to hold, with the publisher not stinting on its production. The printing and binding are excellent as is the simple but elegant layout. I am not too sure about its easy availability in India, but if you can lay your hands on it, I urge you to buy it, for it is, in my opinion, one of the most significant books produced recently, and one that will give you immense pleasure as you browse through it in the late evenings.

—Bikram Grewal

Hume-isms

"His Lordship (Lord Tweeddale) in this letter seems to think that any one who ventures to dispute his dicta is a public offender. This is very childish; we are all quite willing to give him full credit for all the good work he does and has done; but of course if he *will* [use italics for caps] mar the effect of this by flagrant self-sufficiency and an affectation of being the supreme authority in such matters, he *will* be laughed at despite all his merits, and when he makes blunders, as he and *all* of us too often do, *of course* he *will* be more sat upon than other less pretentious mortals."

[*Stray Feathers* 6: 54 footnote re a letter from Lord Tweeddale to the *Ibis* regarding some taxonomic matters.]