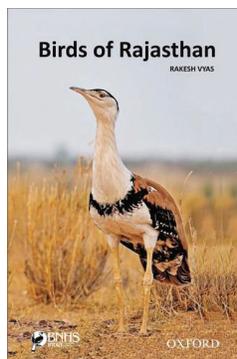


Book review



Birds of Rajasthan

By Rakesh Vyas. 2013. BNHS. Oxford
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 019809859 1 Hardback Pp. xiv + 326
 Price: Rs 700

The growing interest in birds has, in the space of a few years, resulted in the appearance of many regional bird books in the Indian market; *Birds of Rajasthan* being one, published by the Bombay Natural History Society, and Oxford University Press. Rajasthan has the largest land area amongst Indian states, and there is still a great deal of work to be done on the status and range of its birds; from this aspect the joint publication of the book is a positive step.

The first impression of this book is good, beginning with the mouth-watering cover photograph of the declining Great Indian Bustard *Ardeotis nigriceps*, and the Green Avadavat *Amandava formosa* on the back cover. However, it soon disappoints!

The bulk of the book is given to species accounts (239 pp.), each of which occupies a half page, and covers its distribution (which includes, erroneously, the status too), bare parts, features, habits and habitat, food, and conservation status. The distribution section is weak, leaving much to be desired, and I suspect it is based on speculation rather than on actual records. Given that it is a regional guide, an emphasis on detailed distribution records, and current status of each species is desirable, rather than the use of such a broad paintbrush, which masks more than it reveals. Moreover, the author tends to hesitantly provide a very general description of distribution; even for rare bird species that have been recorded only once, or twice, in Rajasthan e.g., Pallid Scops-owl *Otus brucei* (Sangha & Poonia 2013).

The foreword, by the former director of Bombay Natural History Society, Asad R. Rahmani, and preface by Bharat Singh, a former minister in the Rajasthan government, is followed by a brief introduction, which could have been more comprehensive. Although the chapter on bird-ringing comprises three pages in the book, nothing is mentioned about bird-ringing in Rajasthan. Sections like history of bird study, migration, etc., that one would usually expect in regional guides, are missing. No distribution maps are given either.

It is a sad commentary that the book is replete with factual errors:

1. While there are no confirmed, and published records of the Common Merganser *Mergus merganser* from Rajasthan, it is reported here as, "Winter Migrant [sic.]. Rare, reported from Keoladeo Park and National Chambal Sanctuary in east Rajasthan" (p. 67).
2. The rare Red Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicaria* has been recorded only twice in Rajasthan, during passage, in Bikaner, and Tal Chhapar (Sangha & Soni 2003; Sangha *et al.* 2013), but is described here as, "Occasional winter visitor to central, north and west Rajasthan" (p. 138).
3. Neither Kazmierczak (2000), Grimmett *et al.* (2011), or Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) record the Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola* from Rajasthan, but the author states it is a "Winter migrant. Mostly recorded in east and south-east Rajasthan" (p. 141).
4. The Little Tern *Sterna albifrons* is a rare summer breeder in Rajasthan but its status is given as "Resident. Sporadic in Rajasthan, breeding locally at some sites in east Rajasthan" (p. 146). There are only three records of the species from Rajasthan. Two pairs bred at Revasa Lake, Sikar District in 1998 (Sangha & Kulshreshtha 1999), and one bird, in breeding plumage, was recorded at the same site in 1999 (Sangha 2002). Two birds were observed at Kochia ki Dhani, adjacent to Sambhar Lake, on 19 September 2001 (Sangha 2009).
5. The Large Hawk Cuckoo *Hierococcyx sparverioides* is a "winter straggler" to Rajasthan (p. 156). Actually it does not occur in Rajasthan. It is a summer visitor to the Himalayas and parts of north-eastern India, and winters in the Eastern, and Western Ghats (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).
6. The Eurasian Scops Owl *Otus scops* is recorded as a "Winter migrant. Recorded in central and north-west Rajasthan" (p. 163). On the contrary, it reaches southern Pakistan, and western India during its fall migration (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). It has never been recorded in Rajasthan.
7. Syke's Nightjar *Caprimulgus mahrattensis* is a "Breeding Resident" [sic.]. Mostly breeds in sandy desert of western Rajasthan" (p. 167). There is no breeding record from Rajasthan, only a handful sight records.
8. The distribution of the Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti* is given as, "Inhabits east, central, west and south Rajasthan" (p. 185), although all records are from Jaisalmer District, where it affects desolate, barren country in rocky, gravel areas (*magra*) (Sangha 2002; Sangha *in press*).
9. Species that have not been recorded in India are included here, e.g., Finsch's Wheatear *Oenanthe finschii* is reported as a "Winter Migrant. Rare, reported from south Rajasthan", and is also given a local name (p. 222). It is a winter visitor to Baluchistan, Pakistan. No record from India exists (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Kazmierczak 2000; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).
10. The status and distribution of the Yellow-billed Babbler *Turdoides affinis* is given as "Vagrant. Rare individuals reported from western desert of Rajasthan"(p. 225). This is a bird of the southern peninsula, and there are no records from Rajasthan.
11. The Pale-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum erythrorhynchos* is given this strange status, and distribution, "Breeding Resident [sic.]. Sporadic in east and south-east Rajasthan" (p. 253). It does not occur in Rajasthan (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Kazmierczak 2000; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).
12. The Jungle Myna *Acridotheres fuscus* is recorded as a "Breeding Resident [sic.]. Restricted to south Rajasthan, particularly around Mount Abu" (p. 271). The species does not occur in Rajasthan, although an isolated record, from an unknown source from Mount Abu, is shown in the distribution map in Kazmierczak (2000).
13. The Kashmir Flycatcher *Ficedula subrubra* is treated as a "Rare passage migrant. Recorded in north and east Rajasthan"

(p. 278). The species does not occur in Rajasthan.

14. In the table on p. 14, under 'key species' for the Desert National Park, Blackbuck *Antelope cervicapra* is included, although it is not found there. While Macqueen's Bustard *Chlamydotis macqueenii* occurs there in winter, the author has erroneously included the Houbara Bustard *C. undulata*, now considered a distinct species, and removed from the Indian list.

There are so many errors in this book, virtually on every page, that I could go on listing them here, but if a reader is keen, they could e-mail me for the entire list.

The choice, and reproduction of photographs is of variable quality. They are not captioned with the localities, and dates—important omissions. In some cases, only photographs of females are included, e.g., Chestnut-eared Bunting *Emberiza fucata*, whose female, and juvenile, are tricky to tell apart. Many species are shown in breeding plumage, e.g., Brown-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus*, although one usually does not find it in this plumage in Rajasthan. The Barn Owl *Tyto alba* in the photograph on p. 160, is a captive bird, as it is wearing leather jesses.

Some of the photographs in the book carry wrong captions. The Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens* on p. 186 is a Hume's Short-toed Lark *Calandrella acutirostris*—blackish lines on lores and yellow bill are quite conspicuous. On p. 188 it is not Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis* because it has a stout bill.

The book is written in very casual style. The Siberian Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus tristis* (p. 232) should have been placed with other *Phylloscopus* species, but is inserted between the Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius*, and *Sylvia* warblers.

Although more than six pages are devoted to a bibliography (pp. 302–308) it is evident that references are merely listed and not consulted while writing the book. Here are a couple of examples: The Black-capped Kingfisher *Halycon pileata* is recorded "only from Bharatpur" (p. 173), although Rahmani (1997), listed in the bibliography, recorded it in the Thar Desert. Sangha & Naoroji's (2003) record of the Blue-throated Flycatcher *Cyornis rubeculoides* in the Thar Desert is included in bibliography, but its status and distribution is given as "Winter Migrant. Occasionally recorded on passage in east and west Rajasthan" (p. 244).

It is unfortunate that BNHS-India, and Oxford University Press have jointly published a book like this, un-researched, and badly written. It is recommended that the publishers come out with a companion volume of corrigenda, as there is no dearth of errors in the book.

The frustrating volume will stay on the shelf in my library collecting dust in the future. I wish I could get a refund on this book.

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Letter to the Editor

Sighting of Brown Hawk Owl *Ninox scutulata* at Thol Bird Sanctuary, Gujarat

The Brown Hawk Owl *Ninox scutulata* is distributed widely, but locally, throughout the Himalayan foothills, in northern- and central India, West Bengal, Orissa, in the Eastern- and Western Ghats, and in southern India (Ali & Ripley 1981). It is resident in southern Gujarat, mainly in the Dangs (Ali 1954), up to Rajpipla (Monga & Naoroji 1983), and in the adjoining forested areas. However, it has not been noted in the arid parts of Gujarat.

On 17 January 2015, during a birding trip to Thol Bird Sanctuary (23.12°N, 72.35°E) located in Kadi Taluka, Mehsana District, at c. 0830 hrs, we saw a small, hawk-like bird. It was constantly moving in the taller trees at the periphery of the sanctuary. While we were approaching the bird, we observed that a Jungle Babbler *Turdoides striata*, and Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus* were uttering alarm calls towards that bird. After observing and comparing with the field guide, we identified it as a Brown Hawk Owl [101].



We continued to visit the area and observed the Brown Hawk Owl till 14 February 2015. We regularly visit this area three to four times every month, throughout the year. In the following winter, the Brown Hawk Owl was again observed in the sanctuary from 01 December 2015 to 14 February 2016. These observations, from early December till mid-February, suggest that the owl visits Thol only in winter. However, this needs further observations to establish a clearer pattern.

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