

Book Review

A Field Guide to the Birds of the U. S. S. R. 1989. By V. E. Flint, R. L. Boehme, Y. V. Kostin, A. A. Kuznetsov; illustrated by Y. V. Kostin. Translated by N. Bourso-Leland. Princeton University Press. 353 + xxxi pp., 48 colour plates. Cdn\$92 hardcover, Cdn\$39.95 paperback.

Russia, Churchill once observed, is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. Although some of the political fogs may have dissipated somewhat since Stalin's days, ornithologically this statement is almost as true as it was 40 years ago. Here we have the biggest country in the world, almost three times the size of Canada, stretching through 11 time zones from high Arctic tundra to arid desert and everything in between, yet still accessible only with great difficulty and much restriction to most bird-watchers. For all the proud Russian tradition of science, large gaps in the ornithological knowledge of the Soviet Union still exist, as is shown by the discovery of a new species of bird as recently as 1970; and not just some miserable little warbler grovelling around in the undergrowth of an obscure valley, but a gull, with at least 10 breeding colonies and a population of several thousands. Not entirely surprisingly, the popular ornithological literature is also very scant. The standard work, the six-volume *Ptitsy Sovetskovo Soyuz*, by G. P. Dement'ev and N. A. Gladkov, was published almost 40 years ago. The only field-guide-type book that

I have encountered is the Russian-language original of the book under review, *Ptitsy SSSR*, by Vladimir E. Flint and co-authors, published in 1968. This is out of print and almost unobtainable, even in Russia; several times in recent years I have had business colleagues scour bookshops in Moscow for it at my behest, always in vain. Consequently, the publication of an English version by Princeton, albeit at a somewhat increased price (the original in hardcover cost 2 rubles 12 kopecks, a bit over \$3), is a very welcome event.

The book starts off with a translator's foreword, which actually contains much information that would be useful for a visiting birdwatcher. The "Introduction to the English-language Edition" that follows is also worthwhile, since it includes a good map of the biotic zones of the Soviet Union and some substantial sketches of the bird faunas of the different zones. The bulk of the book, just over 300 pages, is devoted to species accounts, which follow a format very familiar to Canadian birders. There is a brief section on field marks, giving the salient

identification features; a longer section on habits, which includes notes on habitat preference, nesting and eggs, general habits and food, and call-notes and song; a very brief description of range (in the Soviet Union only — no mention of world distribution); and a few comments on similar species, which in some cases are somewhat repetitious of details given in the first section. The species accounts are competent and useful, although tending to neglect non-plumage identification features which the field bird-watcher finds useful: for example, the diagnostic “towering” flight of Temminck’s versus Little Stint on being flushed, or the head attitude of Red-throated versus Black-throated Loon. The range of each species is shown by maps, which could be much improved. Up to three species share a map, with ranges indicated by various cross-hatchings and stipples. Where the ranges overlap, or where there is only a very small range in the Soviet Union, the maps are very difficult to interpret. If you don’t already know where Krüper’s Nuthatch or Swinhoe’s Yellow Rail are to be found, you’ll need a magnifying glass and some patience to find out.

The 48 colour plates by Y. V. Kostin are a pleasure to look at and, generally speaking, very reasonably accurate, only falling down occasionally on soft-part colour. The quality of printing by Princeton is also a vast improvement on the original by

Izdatel'stvo Mysl', which was blurred, discoloured, and fuzzy. Western birdwatchers, cossetted by the modern generation of field guides of Europe and North America, will criticize the lack of, for example, flight pictures of gulls and shorebirds, or the sketchy treatment of immature plumages, especially, again, of gulls, but it is perhaps only fair to compare the standard of the present book to what we ourselves had to work from in the sixties. Some plates are more successful than others; I particularly like the buntings (of which Siberia has an abundance), but find the owls and some water-birds to be stilted and unnatural.

One aspect of the present book which is a little disappointing is the apparent lack of any great effort to update it since the original work was published. Writing some time prior to 1968, in the Russian language edition, Dr. Flint stated that the Japanese Crested Ibis was a bird which is “very rare and apparently approaching extinction; in the last 10 years no investigators have succeeded in observing it in our territory.” Twenty-one years later the English version says exactly the same. (In the meantime the situation of this species has indeed become desperate.) Siberia is plagued or blessed (according to your viewpoint) with large quantities of small green or brown warblers, whose identification when they crop up as vagrants in Western Europe or the Aleutians is the

despair or delight (according to your ego) of western observers. Great strides have been made in recent years in the identification of these species (see, for example, *British Birds* 83(3):94-96), but none of this knowledge is included in the species accounts, which are bald translations of the original; indeed, the text specifically states that *Phylloscopus* warblers are "practically indistinguishable in the field", which is quite untrue.

One rather bizarre feature of the book is the extraordinary choice of English names, which seem to be an uneasy hybrid of North American and British usage, with a number peculiar to this book alone, some obviously literal translations of the Russian and some of no provenance discernible to me. Thus we have Red Phalarope, but Red-necked Phalarope and Gray (not Grey) Plover. Horned Grebe is Horned Grebe, but Eared Grebe is Black-necked Grebe, and Little Grebe is Red-throated Dabchik (sic). In what I can only assume is an example of that misplaced pedantry that induces some Canadian birders to call House Sparrows Weaver Finches, Rock Sparrow has become Rock Petronia; ironically, the Russian name, Kam'enniy Vorob'ey means, guess what, Rock Sparrow! There are dozens of other examples; Ring Thrush for Ring

Ousel, Persian Robin for White-throated Robin, Winter Sparrow for American Tree Sparrow. To restore order to the confusion, 30 pages at the end of the book are devoted to a "Cross-reference List", giving a variety of English names, along with scientific equivalents. This is 30 pages wasted; far better to have used the correct names in the text, with synonyms if necessary. It also contains yet further errors, such as obsolete scientific names and other outright mistakes.

I have perhaps been more critical than is my wont in this review, but it is very annoying to see an extremely valuable addition to the ornithological literature (which this book certainly is) marred by error and sloppiness that should have been eliminated by more careful editing. Nevertheless, despite my strictures, I still strongly recommend *A Field Guide to the Birds of the U. S. S. R.* to the armchair dreamer and to the ambitious would-be travelling birder alike.

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