

ABOUT BOOKS

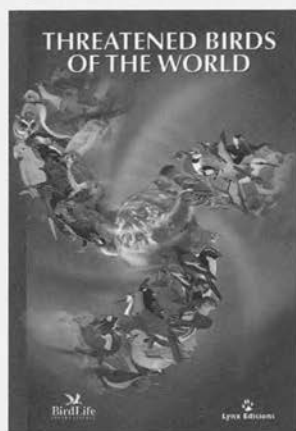
Opposite Sides of the Same Coin

Mark Lynch

Threatened Birds of the World. 2000. Alison J. Stattersfield and David R. Capper, project managers and senior editors. London, England: Bird Life International, and Barcelona, Spain: Lynx Edicions. 852 pages. \$115.00.

Bill Oddie's Gripping Yarns: Tales of Birds and Birding. 2000. Bill Oddie. London, England: Christopher Helm. 224 pages. \$14.95, paperback.

These two books could not be more different in tone, intent, execution, scope, and even size and weight. They represent the two seemingly polar opposite aspects of birding: one concerned with the environment, preservation of habitat, and the fate of the natural world; the other wrapped up in a single-minded pursuit of what could be seen as stamp collecting with feathers. It's the old ornithology versus birding problem. Hopefully, it is apparent to all that the fun and craziness of birding is totally dependent on the health of our environment.



Threatened Birds of the World is Bird Life International's hard copy of the massive World Bird Database (WBDB), extensive data files on all the species of endangered birds. The WBDB was started in 1994 and contains much more information than could possibly be put even into this hefty book. Nearly 1000 people contributed to this important volume, which is now considered the official source for birds on the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) Red List. The publishing of this book is equivalent to issuing an up-to-the-minute state-of-the-world summary of avian life on the planet.

The news is not good: "A shocking one in eight (or c.12 percent) of all bird species have a real risk of becoming extinct in the next 100 years. This is a total of 1,186 bird species. Most worrying, 182 are Critical, meaning that they have an estimated 50 percent chance of surviving over the next 10 years, or three generations" (p. 2).

Of course it is not just birds: "24 percent of mammals, and of those assessed, 27 percent reptiles, 20 percent amphibians and 30 percent of fish are threatened with extinction" (p. 2).

"We are the problem" and "we are the solution" are the first two page headings. This clearly points out the still hopeful theme of this book.

"People drive this extinction crisis. Of the 1,186 globally threatened species, 1,175 (99 percent) are at risk from human activities such as agriculture, logging,

hunting and trapping. Therefore species extinctions are no longer isolated natural events, but the result of major changes in the world's ecosystem" (p. 2).

The three issues that critically need addressing are habitat loss, direct exploitation (as in food and cage birds), and invasives (especially invasive predators). Agriculture and selective logging and cutting are the leading causes of habitat loss. Ninety-three percent of the threatened birds that use forests are found in moist, tropical forests which are being felled at an alarming rate. Other habitats in dire need of protection from human overuse include grasslands, savannas, and wetlands. A two-page map highlights where conservation is critically needed. The island nations of Southeast Asia such as Indonesia, Borneo, and the Philippines have the greatest need, as well as areas of mainland Asia, parts of South America, and Madagascar.

Solutions are complex and not easily instigated. The authors feel that more needs to be done to further identify priority sites and habitats for conservation. Hard science and monitoring have to be the foundation of every declaration of a species status. It is hoped that this book will provide that baseline for such monitoring. Once the data are in, then the really arduous work of shaping public policy and instigating legislation begins, as well as strengthening coalitions of people at the local, national, and international levels.

Every aspect of this book is well done. This comes as little surprise because Lynx Edicions are the folks that publish *Handbook of the Birds of the World*. The bulk of the volume consists of species accounts, two per page. Each account includes a small, good, color illustration, an excellent range map, and complete details of population, ecology, threats, conservation, and targets. The latter point out what needs to be done next to ensure the species' future. Species accounts were sponsored by individuals, charitable institutions, or companies, an interesting scheme to defray costs. Their names appear modestly in the lower corner of each page. Sections of the book are headed by very good, almost full-page color illustrations of critically endangered birds.

Reading the species accounts, one is struck by how many species are poorly known. For many birds there are little hard data on population densities, while at the same time their habitat is being radically altered. For many of these species, it is a race against time. For instance, in the account of the Snoring Rail (*Aramidopsis plateni*) of Sulawesi we read:

"This poorly known rail qualifies as Vulnerable because it is thought to have a small population, which is inferred to be undergoing a continuing decline and increasing fragmentation due to habitat loss" (p. 599).

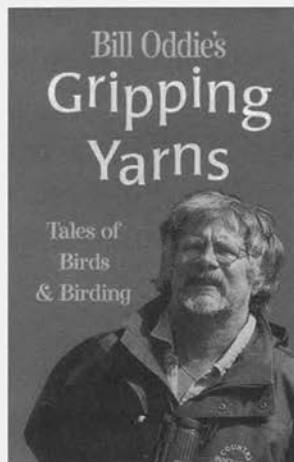
The sad truth is that there are hundreds of poorly known species in far-flung parts of the globe and not enough funding or ornithologists to actually research them. You can't preserve a tract of land simply because you think it might have a population of an endangered bird. I imagine we will lose many unique and wonderful birds simply because there is not enough time and money to get someone there to conduct a study before the land is bulldozed or logged.

Whenever I confront the effort that is needed to begin correcting this global crisis, I start to get depressed. I then have to recall the many conversations I had with my brother Dr. James Lynch about this problem before he died. He was a researcher and ornithologist at the Smithsonian, a person on the front lines, so to speak. His research had taken him all over the world, but most particularly to the Yucatan, Kenya, and Australia. He admitted that the situation globally was very grim when we looked at the problems of habitat loss and human exploitation of the environment. But he always cautioned against getting paralyzed with the enormity and severity of it all. Granted we can do little on the international scale except support (as in money) organizations, like Bird Life International or the IUCN, which are geared for dealing with issues on a global scale. But we *can* concentrate on local initiatives where our efforts can have a direct effect. For instance: we can work to save that local woodlot or marsh; or monitor a local patch, keep consistent records, and send them in to regional schemes like the Important Bird Areas program. We can also cast our votes intelligently.

Threatened Birds of the World is a call to arms or, if need be, a swift kick in the glutes to get you out and into the fight. Or, if you run across those who take the revisionist stance that there is no pressing global environmental crisis, this weighty tome is great for dropping on toes or whacking heads.

After reading *Threatened Birds of the World*, you may need to turn to *Bill Oddie's Gripping Yarns* for comic relief. Bill Oddie is best known to Americans as the author of the classic *Bill Oddie's Little Black Bird Book*, which in Oddie's inimitable way, told "the truth about bird watching." The truth of course is that birding is more than a bit strange, filled with odd characters, and is totally fun. It was in that book that Americans were first exposed to such delightful British birding lingo as "twitching" and "being gripped off" ("a nasty experience. It means that you have dipped out, but somebody else hasn't" [p. 46]).

There is something about the Brits and birding that is a match made in heaven. First of all, they invented birding, or at least think they did. Second, they are much better at it than anyone else in the world, or at least that's what they would like us to believe. Let's face it, there is something very Monty Pythonesque about this nit-picking, jargon-laden, plain odd avocation. The next time you find yourself standing around sewer beds in the bitter cold waiting for some feathered bit of fluff to appear, see how easy it is to imagine any one of a number of characters made famous by John Cleese or Michael Palin also waiting for the "tick." I confess that I learned my first lessons about how to act like a birder from reading the very British author Stephen Potter's classics on *Gamesmanship* and *One Upmanship*. Potter, after all, introduced me to the ploy of Bearded Titmanship and how to perfect the withering "plonking" tone of voice when questioning someone's call in the field.




Bill Oddie's skill is to capture those moments that all birders experience while at the same time poking fun at the more pompous aspects of it all. The "60-odd pieces" that are found in *Gripping Yarns* were originally printed in the magazine *Birdwatch*, although some of these short essays have been rewritten and expanded. Oddie writes about the joys of birding his local patch, whether it is cricket to tick dead birds, the frustration of missing a rarity, and even the sensuous delights of eating Mars Bars while waiting for something decent to show up. His writing style is enthusiastic, boisterous, and irreverent. For Yanks, there is an ever-expanding lexicon of colloquial British to enjoy, including such liberally used words as "narked" and "sprogs." The latter refers to "relatively common birds you still need on your list" (p. 53). Sprinkled throughout are some of Bill's dotty illustrations, which can perhaps best be described as Thomas Bewick by way of Charles Schultz. They do perfectly enhance the tone of these pieces.

Some of the essays are about places farther afield from Britannia, prime birding locations like Trinidad, Cyprus, Portugal, and Morocco. Bill's beloved Fair Isle is mentioned several times. Of particular interest are the several essays on trips to America to bird Arizona, Louisiana, New York City, and Cape May. In "A Tale Of Two Godwits," Oddie tells of traveling to Martha's Vineyard and hooking up with someone he calls "Big Verne" whom he describes as: "physically . . . sort of a Meatloaf x ZZ Top hybrid" (p. 139). After some interesting partying, the whole gang zips off to Monomoy to try to find the Bar-tailed Godwit. I would love to hear from Big Verne about this particular excursion. There is no doubt that Oddie has conflicted feelings about America. He absolutely loves the birds here, but you get the feeling that for him the jury is still out on Yank birders.

Bill Oddie's Gripping Yarns is pure entertainment, chock-a-block with light pieces but always right on target. In the chapter "Some You Win" (p.108), Oddie perfectly unites the diverse themes of this review. In a response to a letter that asks "where has the old enthusiasm gone?" Oddie responds:

"In recent times, I've put every bit of my enthusiasm into conservation as I ever did into trashing twitchers in the *Little Black Bird Book*. Energy rather better spent, I'd suggest actually. The trouble is, though, it is not always a jolly experience. Habitat loss, pollution, poisoning, and politics aren't exactly frivolous topics. 'We all know it's not a perfect world out there without being reminded of it' writes my pen pal Clayton. Well, if you are involved in conservation, you are reminded of it every flipping day. What's more, it's part of the job to remind everyone else about it too. I know I'm using a cheerily meant ribbing to bring up a serious point, but that's how I feel today. Sometimes conservation seems like a series of losing battles. And it can get you down. But when you win one, it feels terrific."

To which I say "Here! Here!" as I don my wellies and anorak to go out to twitch on my local patch. 

References

Oddie, Bill. 1980. *Bill Oddie's Little Black Bird Book*. London, England: Eyre Methuen.

Potter, Stephen. 1970. *The Complete Upmanship*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
Important Bird Areas (IBA). For more information, contact: Andrea Jones
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Big Year in the Blackstone River Corridor that runs between Worcester and Providence and co-
editing and co-writing a massive upcoming book on where to find birds in Western
Massachusetts.*

Executive Order on Migratory Birds

President Clinton today [January 11, 2001] issued a landmark Executive Order that requires Federal agencies to avoid or minimize the negative impact of their actions on migratory birds, and to take active steps to protect birds and their habitat.

The Executive Order directs each Federal agency taking actions having or likely to have a negative impact on migratory bird populations to work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to develop an agreement to conserve those birds. The protocols developed by this consultation are intended to guide future agency regulatory actions and policy decisions; renewal of permits, contracts or other agreements; and the creation of or revisions to land management plans. In addition to avoiding or minimizing impacts to migratory bird populations, agencies will be expected to take reasonable steps that include restoring and enhancing habitat, preventing or abating pollution affecting birds, and incorporating migratory bird conservation into agency planning processes whenever possible.

Most bird species in the United States are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, the domestic law that implements the United States' commitment to four international conventions for the protection of shared migratory bird resources. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) protects species or families of birds that live, reproduce or migrate within or across international borders at some point during their annual life cycle. Federal courts have affirmed that Federal agencies are subject to the MBTA's prohibitions on "take" of migratory birds.

The Executive Order is designed to assist Federal Agencies in their efforts to comply with the MBTA, and does not constitute any legal authorization to take migratory birds or otherwise supercede the MBTA's requirements. The MBTA requires Federal agencies to have regulatory authorization from the Service before taking migratory birds.

For further information contact: USFWS Office of Public Affairs, Chris Tollefson, 202-208-5634.

The complete text of this Executive Order is posted on <Massbird.Org>.

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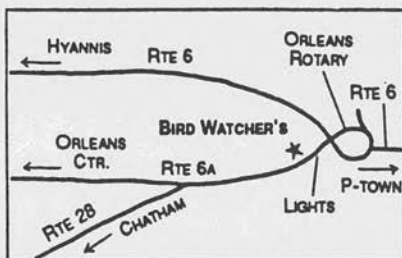
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