

**Nightjars: A Guide to Nightjars and Related Nightbirds**, by Nigel Cleere, illustrated by Dave Nurney. 1998. Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, CT. 317 pages, 36 color plates, numerous line drawings, 123 maps, 2 tables. Hardback, \$40.00. ISBN 0-300-07457-3. The CD **A Sound Guide to Nightjars and Related Nightbirds** (not reviewed here), compiled by Richard Ranft, is available separately for \$20.00, ISBN 0-300-07457-3.

Why should you buy a guide that you'll probably never carry in the field, for a group of birds that you hardly ever see? The author's stated purpose was to put under one roof illustrations of all the nightjars and their relatives (many painted for the first time), and to summarize "much of what is currently known about these fascinating birds." There is no previous compendium about these birds. Thus, this is not just another book about nightjars, it's *the* book about nightjars.

I examined this book with several thoughts in mind: How does it compare to other worldwide monographs written by a British/European author? How does it stand up as an introduction to a charismatic but difficult-to-observe group of birds? How well does it work in North America?

Several earlier worldwide guides have been broadly criticized for their decidedly Eurocentric bias. Seemingly written in a vacuum, neither text nor illustrations demonstrated much familiarity with the biology or field characteristics of New World species. To their credit, the author and illustrator of *Nightjars* augmented a rigorous literature search with a significant effort to contact ornithologists in the Americas. The list of persons who provided information, recordings, or photos is rich in New World contacts. Still, some with decades of field experience in Latin America are not mentioned, and this may account for some inconsistencies. For example, the Great and Northern potoos, both of which can be quite common, are considered rare to uncommon. Some of the earlier guides were criticized for being woefully devoid of documentation in the text. The introductory chapters of *Nightjars* are liberally peppered with citations, and in the species accounts, primary sources are listed at the end of each write-up.

The book follows a traditional classification, treating about 120 species in five families (the Oilbird, frogmouths, potoos, owllet-nightjars, and nightjars), and stands up very well as considerably more than just an introduction to caprimulgiform families. Short introductory chapters cover taxonomy and relationships, distribution, topography and morphology, structure and mechanics, plumages and molt, behavior, and the fossil record. Each species account includes the sections we've come to expect, including identification and comparison with similar species, voice descriptions, habitat and habits, food, breeding behavior, measurements, distribution, status, etc.

The plates are uncrowded and reasonably attractive; they illustrate almost no variation in pose, but then neither do most nightjars. In all, 119 species are illustrated; two are probably extinct, and three are known only from single specimens. A line drawing in the text illustrates an additional species known only from a wing. The Oilbird, frogmouths, potoos, and owllet-nightjars are depicted on perches. All nightjars are illustrated both perched and in flight; for the latter, both male and female are generally shown. Only a few juveniles are illustrated. The 90 nightjars are gray, brown, or rufous and have evolved beautiful, intricately patterned plumage resembling dead leaves, tree bark, or sun-dappled soil. Nonetheless, Nurney succeeded admirably with the difficult task of making each bird look different. A minor objection with the illustrations: the nightjars were all painted with one wing tip angled upward, presumably to depict patterning in the primaries. Typically, most nightjars roost with the wings held flat over the tail.

How does the book work in North America? Perhaps not as well as one would hope. Some readers may be disappointed by coverage of the highly variable Common Nighthawk: only one of the seven races found north of Mexico is illustrated.

## BOOK REVIEWS

Identifying the Antillean Nighthawk does not suddenly become easier, and no habitat information for this popular south Florida target species is presented.

Distinguishing the Chuck-will's-widow from the Whip-poor-will is dealt with in the descriptions of each. However, distinguishing Stephen's (or Mexican) Whip-poor-will, the breeding form of the southwestern U.S., from the vocally different eastern birds will still be a problem unless the bird calls. Minor plumage differences are noted, but the undertail patterns are not illustrated, and I did not find the voice descriptions helpful. Listening to a recording will clarify the voice difference, although a sonogram would serve the purpose for most readers. Surprisingly, no sonograms appear in the text: these are useful learning tools for birds with rhythmic calls, and I consider their absence one of the text's great weaknesses. Many of the nightjars' scientific names have delightful meanings, and people are often interested in such translations; perhaps they will be included in the next edition.

I have spent a fair amount of time chasing and photographing nightjars and potoos. There are few groups of birds whose images or voices can so powerfully transport me to faraway places. Be warned: reading this book will not immerse you in the magic of a field experience; neither will it make these birds much easier for you to see. It will, however, provide you with much information that puts their largely hidden lives into some greater context. In that sense, it satisfies the author's goal, and for that reason you should buy it.

*Robert A. Behrstock*