

Introduction

This is a complete and authoritative photographic guide to the wild birds of Britain and Ireland. It covers all plumages likely to be recorded of every species accepted onto the British and Irish lists up to the end of March 2016, including rarities. It also covers a few species that have recently been identified but not yet officially added to the lists. Many other species have been recorded as escapes from captivity or introductions, and a number of these have bred in the wild. Those that seem most likely to become established or lead to confusion with regular species are included, either with the relevant species or in a separate section at the end of the book (p. 522). While primarily an identification guide, the book also presents up-to-date population estimates for regular breeding, wintering and migrant birds, and, for rarities, a summary of the number of records. For the increasing number of species that are of conservation concern, information is included on their status based on current knowledge and assessments up to January 2016.

At the end of the book is a complete list of all the species on the British or Irish lists, presented in scientific (taxonomic) order. Uniquely, this list summarizes the conservation status and relevant EU and domestic conservation legislation relating to each species (see p. 524). This will be useful to birdwatchers, conservation managers, landowners and estate managers and local authorities alike, and has been verified by experts at Biocensus ecological consultants and the RSPB.

Producing this book has been an ambition of **WILDGuides** for many years, but without the help and advice readily offered by so many people this ambition could not have been fulfilled. Without the photographs, in particular, this project could never have been completed. Although the majority of the images were taken by the authors, bird photographers from all over the world have enthusiastically offered their images: the photographs themselves stand as testament to the quality of their work, and the outstanding collection of pictures presented reflects their very considerable skill and countless hours of dedicated effort. Most of the photographs were taken in Britain or Ireland and include, where possible, images of individual rarities that have been recorded. The photographers are acknowledged individually at the end of the book (p. 541), and details are given of who took each of the images. A special mention must go to the staff at the Agami Photo Agency in the Netherlands, since without their invaluable and enthusiastic assistance the project would inevitably have stalled.

Each regular breeding, wintering and migratory species has a map, annotated where appropriate to show the destination of birds migrating to, from or through Britain and Ireland. The maps have been adapted from base maps kindly supplied by BirdLife International, the international authority on the range and status of wild birds.

This book has evolved considerably during its preparation. New rarities have been discovered, new decisions made that affect the British and Irish lists, and new identification criteria continue to be proposed and tested for difficult species. It is intended that the book will be updated and revised to reflect future changes in status and new records. But it would also be extremely valuable to have input from readers in other ways: if you have suggestions that would help improve the book's accuracy or ease of use, they would be very welcome. While the authors have done everything possible to ensure accuracy, should you find errors or omissions please contact **WILDGuides**.

Using this book

The book will help birdwatchers at any level of experience and expertise to identify what they see, using a simple step-by-step approach. You should be able to find a bird by looking at the contents list or the following gallery of thumbnail images, and turning to the relevant section if you know roughly what you are looking at – a duck, a wading bird, a woodpecker, or a small

songbird. Possibilities can then be narrowed down using the group introductions. These give a brief overview of the species within each section, and subdivisions help further to narrow down the possibilities (and to highlight other options that might need to be excluded).

Alternatively, you can scan through the book to find the likely group or pinpoint the bird that looks like the best fit. However, it is essential to read the text and check the maps and status details in conjunction with looking at the photographs. One of the most common causes of misidentifications is jumping to a wrong conclusion without checking all available facts. The book contains more than 3,200 photographs and presents an incomparable set of images of British and Irish birds, so browsing and finding those that look most like your bird will be a rewarding experience – but it is all too easy to go wrong.

Once you find a likely answer to your identification problem, check all the material on the pages – is the bird in the right location, in the right habitat, at the right season? Is there a commoner, or more likely, alternative? One feature might seem just right, but is it overruled by others – the tail colour, the wingbar, the bird's size, or the shape of its bill? A single feature is never as reliable as an overall assessment.

Checking the texts and pictures against the bird as you watch it can be invaluable, but you may not have time: it is better to concentrate on the bird while you can. Taking photographs can be invaluable and enjoyable but again may reduce the time you have actually watching and enjoying the bird. Making notes and sketches, if you can, helps you look at each part of the bird more closely and systematically (you cannot write down the colour of the legs or bill, or undertail coverts, without looking at them first!) and to build up an overall assessment of what it looks like, how it behaves and how it calls or sings.

The birds in this book are deliberately arranged to allow close comparison of similar species (rather than appearing in strict taxonomic order, as in the list at the back of the book (p. 524)). This guide begins with water birds (those that habitually swim) and then moves to seabirds (from Gannet through shearwaters, gulls and terns to auks). It then covers waterside birds, including those conventionally termed 'waders' (or shorebirds), followed by herons and egrets and 'crakes and rails' (including Moorhen and Coot). Following these are the grouse and partridges, pigeons, owls and birds of prey, and a mixed group including kingfishers, cuckoos and woodpeckers, before the large and varied grouping known as Passerines, or perching birds.

As well as showing all the species that have been recorded in the wild in Britain or Ireland, details are provided of all the subspecies (or races) known to have occurred – as well as distinctive plumages, where relevant. Some birds that may be seen apparently 'wild' (even though most are introduced or escapes from captivity) are briefly described in the relevant section for comparison, or are listed at the back of the book (p. 522).

The photographs – many taken especially for this book – have been carefully selected to enable detailed comparisons to be made of birds in similar poses and similar lighting. In designing the pages, close attention has been paid to ensuring that the images are scaled appropriately. When trying to decide on a bird's identity, it is important to bear in mind that colours can be affected by many factors, such as bright sunlight, dull conditions, or reflections from water.

There is an abundance of books, regular journals and magazines catering for all degrees of interest and experience, and many organisations to consider joining. You can learn much more, become involved in conservation or bird survey work and support conservation locally and internationally, by joining a local bird club, a Wildlife Trust, the RSPB (the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds), the BTO (the British Trust for Ornithology) or the WWT (the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust) or their Scottish, Welsh and Irish equivalents.