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PARROTS OF AFRICA, MADAGASCAR AND THE MASCARENE ISLANDS. Biology, Ecology and Conservation

Mike Perrin, with photographs by Cyril Laubscher

Wits University Press
Hardcover, 400 pages. R640.
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In the early 1990s, Professor Mike Perrin identified a gap in African ornithology, namely the lack of knowledge concerning parrots of the Afrotropical region and of detailed research on them. During the following two decades he initiated and supervised a number of research projects, the first being the study of the Cape Parrot *Poicephalus robustus* by the late Olaf Wirminghaus. As a well-published scientist and with years of experience in research, Mike set up the Research Centre for African Parrot Conservation at the University of KwaZulu-Natal to address this

lack of knowledge regarding a charismatic and threatened group of birds.

The study of the Cape Parrot set a firm foundation for further post-graduate investigations, the results of many of which were published in the form of peer-reviewed papers and popular articles. The publications arising from these projects are a valuable contribution to our understanding of Afrotropical parrots and their conservation, and it is the findings concerned, together with additional literature, that have ultimately been summarised in Mike's valuable book, *Parrots of Africa, Madagascar and the Mascarene Islands*.

A number of other books on parrots are available and many of them target aviculturists or birdwatchers. Joseph Forshaw's *Parrots of the World*, now in its seventh edition, is a momentous monograph that some might suggest overshadows Mike's book. However, the latter's synthesis on the subject of Afrotropical parrots collates a wealth of information accumulated over the past two decades and ensures the accessibility of detail otherwise possibly available only to academics. Moreover, it includes numerous references applicable to the topic and summarises a vast amount of data that will prove valuable to academics, aviculturists, birdwatchers, conservationists and naturalists. In certain respects the book may seem intimidating,

considering the overwhelming amount of information presented, but the knowledge is well summarised in selected chapters and readers can focus on their topic of interest.

An invaluable contribution to the book is the photographs, both of parrots and the environments in which they occur. Of particular note are Cyril Laubscher's images of parrots under controlled light conditions. They capture the beauty of Africa's unique parrot fauna and add appeal to the overall presentation of the book.

Parrots (order Psittaciformes) are a highly threatened group, with the survival of many species extremely dependent on aggressive conservation efforts and support from captive-breeding programmes. The birds face a multitude of threats, from unsustainable harvesting in the wild for the cage-bird and avicultural markets to modification and loss of habitat, persecution as pests, and disease. To address the conservation of these birds, information and increased awareness concerning them are critical. Overall, this attractive and detailed work on Afrotropical parrots provides just that. This comprehensive and valuable contribution to knowledge of Africa's avifauna is a welcome addition to my library and I strongly recommend it.

CRAIG SYMES



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It's no exaggeration to call *The Handbook of the Birds of the World* one of the most significant ornithological publications of all time. Commonly referred to as *HBW*, this monumental 17-volume tome covers every known extant species, and represents an incomparable resource to anyone who has more

than a passing interest in birds. But the era of the printed book is inexorably drawing to an end and it came as no great surprise when Lynx Edicions recently announced *HBW Alive*, the online version of the series.

When *HBW Alive* was launched in July, I signed up with alacrity. Individual access is via one of two annual packages, either a basic subscription for €29.95 or a supporting subscription for €44.95 – both very reasonable considering the incredible amount of information made available. Both packages give you access to the family and species accounts (and, of course, the species illustrations for which *HBW* has received justifiable acclaim), by way of an easily-navigable interface. Subscribers can generate customised plates containing members of a family or genus of interest. In addition, searches can be filtered geographically and results restricted to continents, regions and/or countries.

The species and family accounts include clickable links to geo-referenced photographs, sound clips and/or videos archived in Lynx's Internet Bird Collection, adding an entirely new dimension to them. (These media may not be accessible from all mobile devices; I was unable to play sound clips or videos when browsing the site on an iPad.) But to my mind the single most significant aspect of *HBW Alive* is that all the content is continuously



updated, ensuring that subscribers can access the most current information available on a species or family. In addition, supporting subscribers will be able to access PDFs of many of the papers listed in the bibliography. There are other features too numerous to mention here; many are highlighted in the introductory video on the home page.

Although scrolling down a computer screen will probably never be able to match the sheer joy of paging through the beautifully illustrated family accounts of the original *HBW*, I for one am delighted that this amazing compilation of ornithological information is now accessible electronically. The team at Lynx Edicions deserves full kudos for yet another ground-breaking product that takes global ornithology further into the 21st century.

ANDREW McKECHNIE

TAKEN CAPTIVE BY BIRDS

Marguerite Poland; illustrated by Craig Ivor

Penguin Books
Hardcover, dustjacket; 143 pages. R250.
ISBN 978-0-14-353044-2



Marguerite Poland is a versatile and prolific author, well known for her delightful children's stories, but also for her more serious novels and her historical biography of St Andrew's College. In addition, she contributed the text for *The Abundant Herds: A Celebration of the Nguni Cattle of the Zulu People*, so beautifully illustrated by Leigh Voigt.

This memoir is a nostalgic return to her roots in the Eastern Cape at her home 'Kwezintaka' (the Place of Birds), which was subsequently changed to a more prosaic 'Penderley'. But for Marguerite it remained a place of birds: the ominous Spotted Eagle-Owl at the bottom of the garden, dikkops, the robin and the thrush, the doves, the shrikes and, although just a nocturnal voice, most beloved of all, the Fiery-necked Nightjar.

This book is not so much about birds as the memories they evoked of a bygone era. Fluent in isiXhosa, she incorporates many onomatopoeic bird names as well as some observations of behaviour, such as the regular piratical attacks of the resident droongo on the African Hoopoe.

The text is a tapestry of recollections woven on the loom of a happy and secure childhood, and her family features prominently in her stories. Her evocative text is greatly enhanced by the delightful monochrome sketches of Craig Ivor and his skill is exceptional.

PETER STEYN

