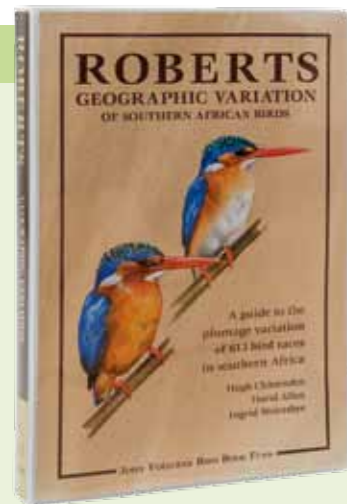


reviews YOU CAN use



Roberts Geographic Variation of Southern African Birds

Hugh Chittenden, David Allan and Ingrid Weiersbye
John Voelcker Bird Book Fund,
Cape Town
284 pages, PVC cover. R220
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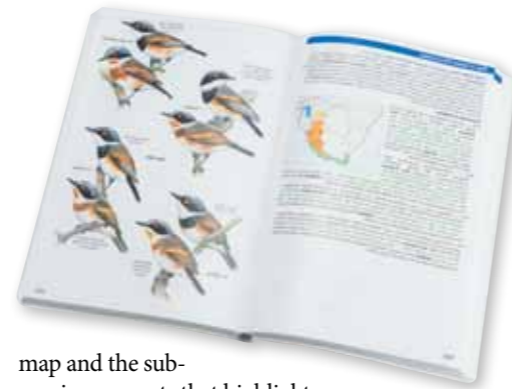
Following on the success of the *Roberts Field Guide*, Hugh Chittenden has used his position as chairman of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund to publish this guide to subspecific variation in southern African birds. Working with David Allan from the Durban Natural History Museum and artist Ingrid Weiersbye, Chittenden has produced

BOOK REVIEW ENIGMATIC VARIATIONS

a guide that illustrates 613 geographic variants of 224 species, with a further 102 subspecies described but not illustrated. The decision of which variants to include was based on whether they would be distinct to birders in the field. As a result the forms described typically differ in plumage colour or pattern rather than in size.

The authors make it clear that they do not attempt to evaluate the validity of named subspecies, despite having gone to considerable effort to assess the merits of the various named taxa. They could have been more assertive in reporting those taxa that are perhaps not worth recognising. This was a nettle not grasped when subspecies were reinstated in the seventh edition of *Roberts*, because there was no comparative assessment similar to the one that formed the basis for this book.

The book's introduction summarises the historical development of subspecies as a taxonomic group, their evolutionary significance, and gives biographical sketches for three of the region's leading taxonomists: Austin Roberts, Phillip Clancey and Michael Irwin. The species are presented in IOC list order, which provides an up-to-date standard, but might confuse those birders already struggling to cope with the different sequences followed by *Roberts 7* and the other regional field guides. Each species has a brief introduction, a range



map and the subspecies accounts that highlight their distinct features, with the plates opposite the texts capturing the major features of each taxon. There are three appendices. The longest lists the material consulted, and could have been published on the Internet. The others give the etymology of subspecies not illustrated and a list of polytypic species not included in the book (which has not updated new taxa since *Roberts 7* was published).

The book is not without its drawbacks; at least one map has the subspecies transposed (African Goshawk), breeding ranges are shown for only one migrant species, and females of some dimorphic species are not illustrated. However, the guide represents a novel approach to making geographic variation accessible to birders, and is an extremely useful addition to the region's birding tools.

PETER RYAN

BINS FOR BIRDING BIGGER ISN'T ALWAYS BETTER

Until recently I had always been a fan of 10x42 binoculars, believing them to be the best 'one size fits all' option and the magnification of choice for observing distant birds. However, tired of lugging around a heavy pair of 10x42 bins, several months ago I bought the newly released Swarovski EL 8x32 Swarovision.

I surmised that I would sacrifice some light-gathering power and image magnification in the changeover, but I was wrong – I could still easily identify those tricky eagles in flight! The new pair succeeds in all those areas where a 10x is supposed to be superior, and it is much lighter (581 grams) and more compact.

What should you consider when choosing the best pair of binoculars for birding? I look for one that focuses at close range, is nitrogen-purged (so the lenses don't fog up), and has fluorite coatings, HD, high eye-relief, roof-prism and clever ergonomics. Choose a pair with 8x or 10x magnification. Remember, however, that 10x, although giving great magnification, also delivers a narrower field of view, which makes it harder to locate a bird in a tree, for instance.

The second number on the binoculars (32 or 42, for example) indicates the diameter in millimetres of the objective lens; the general recommendation for birding has always been to choose a 42-mm diameter. The EL32 Swarovision is, however, superior to most 42-mm binoculars, thanks to its lens coatings. The lenses are HD fluorite glass and include 'field flattener' technology that gives impressive image-edge sharpness and distortion-free viewing.

The HD glass provides excellent light and colour transmission, even in low-light conditions.

Eye-relief and field of view are two important considerations. The EL 8x32 has an eye-relief of 20mm, making it user friendly, particularly if you wear spectacles. The minimum accepted norm is an eye-relief of 16mm, so the new Swarovision easily exceeds this. The wide field of view on the EL 8x32 is 423 feet, the largest



that Swarovski has ever produced on a roof-prism binocular. Ergonomic magnesium housing with rubber armoring makes these bins extremely comfortable to hold for long periods, and the large, grooved, central focus wheel facilitates light and smooth focusing.

In my opinion this is one of the best binoculars available today. I have found it extremely practical to use, very well designed and optically

impeccable. The fact that you are getting this level of performance in binoculars this size is astounding. My only complaint is the hard plastic eyecup cover; I would have preferred one in a softer rubber that is less obtrusive. Meticulousness at this level does not come cheap (a pair retails for roughly R23 500), but this may well be the only pair of binoculars that you need to buy for your birding.

MARTIN BENADIE

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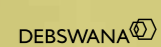


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