



Big Bird Book Cost \$1.15 Million

The sixth volume of the *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds* cost \$1.15 million to research and compile, according to the publishers Oxford University Press in Melbourne. Not surprisingly, the ornithological reference costs around \$520. A set of the *Handbooks* to date would cost \$2855 and there is one more volume in preparation for publication in early 2005.

Volume Six is about the size of a family *Bible*, runs to 1226 pages, and covers the families of birds from 'Pardalotes to Shrike-thrushes'. If that sounds unfamiliar it is because most of the families and species inside are Australian. In fact there are only a few New Zealand species in this volume which continues previous coverage of the

'songbirds or perching birds'.

There are detailed descriptions of 107 bird species but the New Zealand birds include only the grey and Chatham Island warblers, tomtit, robin and black robin, whitehead, yellowhead and brown creeper. Set alongside their Australian relatives, not to mention whole unrelated groups as diverse as the whipbirds, thornbills, quail-thrushes and jewel-babblers, the volume is a reminder of comparatively how few native birds New Zealand has.

The detailed articles on New Zealand species are extremely valuable, however. They summarise research and provide detailed references to the sources of all information. Using a scientific shorthand for this crams in even more detail.

The familiar but secretive grey

warbler or riroriro has 15 pages of tiny, double column type.

There are statistics of measurements and weights, and of trees where the largely insectivorous birds may forage. Sketches include particular details such as varied examples of their hanging nest shapes and the pattern on the upper tail.

Strangely, while listing 'other English names' the book does not use Maori: thus the yellowhead, now quite frequently known through the Department of Conservation as the mohua, appears alternatively only as 'yellow-headed flycatcher' and 'bush canary'. The recent decline of this bird to the status of a rapidly disappearing species is detailed with statistics and locations.

Like the previous volumes,

this 'Pardalotes to Shrike-thrushes' offers details for field identification of each bird, its habitat, distribution, population, movements, food, social organisation, social behaviour, voice, breeding, plumages and shapes. Besides the 37 colour plates showing the birds, there are detailed sketches of their peculiarities or behaviour, distribution maps, and often sonagrams of their voices.

The ultimate aim of the *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds* is a seven-volume summary of scientific knowledge about the 952 species of birds recorded in this region. Its physical resemblance to a *Bible*, indeed a series of *Bibles*, could also be a metaphor for its function to ornithologists.

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