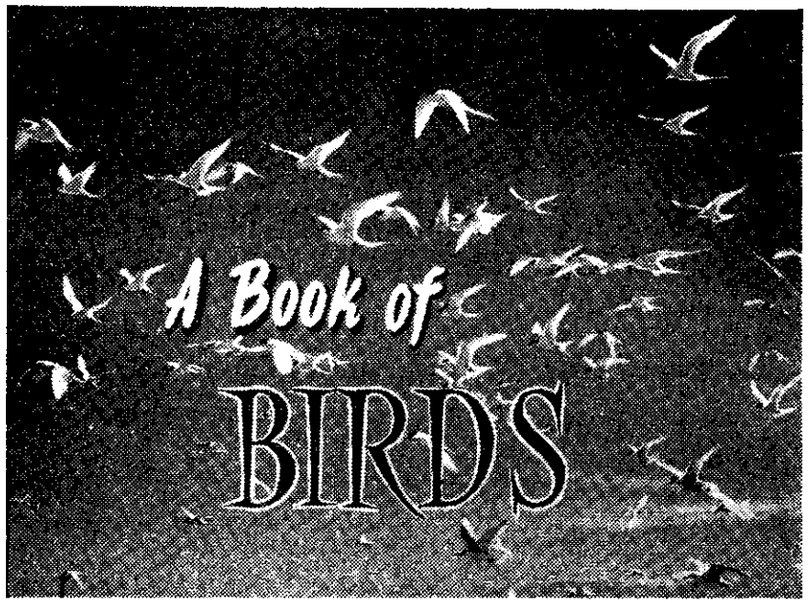

NEW ZEALAND BIRDS, by W. R. B. Oliver, D.Sc., F.R.S.N.Z., etc. Second edition, revised and enlarged; A. H. and A. W. Reed, 661 pp., £6.

(Reviewed by C. A. Fleming)

IN 1873, two hundred of our grandfathers subscribed three guineas for Buller's History of the *Birds of New Zealand,* with superb hand-coloured plates by Keulemanns, prince of 19th century bird artists. Buller's standard works (two editions and supplement) had no successors in the early 20th century (when this country and its birds were changing rapidly), until Oliver's first edition in 1930 provided a handy up-to-date and authoritative summary of knowledge. The need that work filled has increased in the past 25 years. In an age of science, ornithology has become a most popular science for the amateur. The data to be summarised in a handy reference work have approximately doubled and an ever-increasing army of bird-watchers, photographers, trampers, sportsmen, scouts and guides is hungry for facts about the birds that play a large part in our national tradition.

The second edition follows the general plan of its predecessor, with chapters on history, structure, distribution, migration, changes in the fauna, the economic value of birds (no mention of their uneconomic value, so important to the bird-watcher), on species, subspecies and classification, introducing a systematic review of New Zealand species, native, extinct, and introduced. Almost twice the size of the first edition, it contains many new illustrations, about 360 in all.

Since Darwin's day, zoologists have tried to show their ideas on animal relationships by the names and classification they use. As opinions change, the names change too, to the layman's annoyance. Scientists must be free to differ, always with the pious hope, the elusive ideal, of approaching ultimate stability. Oliver differs from most contemporaries, probably from all, in his views on bird classification and nomenclature. The book follows his opinions on evolutionary sequence and introduces a novel method of naming the interbreeding colour phases of several New Zealand birds. For forms like Black Fantail, which most students now treat as "phases" of the normal forms with which they freely interbreed (and thus not as separate species or sub-species), he uses the technical term "semispecies" in a different sense from its original meaning, a questionable procedure. Oliver's definition of a species results in many deviations from usage in other books.

The descriptions of birds and keys to their identity have been drawn up with great care from specimens—but how many readers will have the chance to use the descriptions to identify dead specimens? Field characters, by which so many wild birds can be identified at sight, are rarely mentioned. Ernest Thompson Seton writes of a lad who had a book to identify ducks "in the hand," which was no use for naming wild ducks at a distance. So he made sketches of mounted ducks to show their distinctive simplified patterns. Bird books in Europe and America now specialise in such bird-spotting aids, so badly needed for New Zealand waders and petrels. When straining through spray-drenched binoculars from a tossing vessel, what use to know that Buller's Mollymawk "can be distinguished from the Grey-headed Mollymawk by the broad base of the culminicorn"? We are not told that these similar birds differ conspicuously in relative beak length. Keys based on breeding plumages are little use to identify immature and wintering terns (for instance) which so often puzzle the field ornithologist. To be fair, the book does not aim to be a field guide, but many readers will try to use it as one, like the lad in Thompson Seton's story.

Dr. W. R. B. Oliver

Some misleading anachronisms have been perpetuated. No longer, alas, is the Kakapo "still plentiful in the larger areas of forest," nor the Weka "quite common" at Rodney Point. These statements were scarcely true in 1930, and have escaped correction in 1955. The chapter on Migration, unchanged from