

Book Review

Birds of the Eastern Caribbean. - By PETER EVANS.

Published by Macmillan Education Ltd., London. 1990. 168pp. 110 colour photos. £4.95

The recent death of James Bond, the acknowledged doyen of Caribbean ornithologists for many years, highlights the fact that virtually no-one else has been able to match his achievement of acquiring and publishing knowledge of the birds of the many different islands of the Antilles. This slim and inexpensive volume, which deals with the birds of the area from the Virgin Islands south to Grenada, is therefore a welcome addition to Macmillan's natural history series on the Caribbean.

The author, Dr. Peter Evans, is a respected and experienced ornithologist who has spent much time during the last decade or so engaged in rainforest studies on Dominica, so, as would be expected, the most comprehensive accounts in the book relate to the birds of that island. The avifauna of some other islands of the Eastern Caribbean are more sketchily treated, especially as far as the illustrations are concerned. However, an admirable balance has generally been achieved in the species accounts, and there is a good introduction with succinct and pertinent remarks on ecology, conservation and breeding biology.

Each of the 180 species, including a comparatively large number of island endemics, is briefly described, with added remarks on diet, behaviour and breeding. There are also brief accounts of the species' range, some of these rather inadequate. Finally, there is a useful bibliography to aid the specialist, a valuable list of the main bird-watching sites on the various islands, and a particularly commendable (albeit incomplete) checklist of all the species to be found on the various islands, divided into thirteen convenient sections.

All in all, the text seems to be admirable. I found very few typographical errors, and most of my reservations concern matters of minor importance (which the author may well dispute!). Nevertheless, it is incorrect to say that the

Barn Swallow has a white rump, and misleading to describe the Purple Gallinule as green-backed (rather than greenish blue); I was also surprised to read that the "female" Rufous-breasted Hermit is "more rufous" than the male.

My more serious criticisms relate to the colour photographs. The habitat pictures reveal Peter Evans to be an excellent photographer, but I found many of the bird illustrations disappointing. In a book of this kind the pictures should serve either an artistic or an identification purpose. Quite a few of them do neither, although there are notable exceptions (e.g. parrots, some seabirds). Apart from hand-held birds, several of the smaller species suffer from inadequate sharpness of focus and others from poor lighting. In particular, the Bananaquit – surely one of the most accessible species in the area – is badly illustrated. Also, unfortunate editorial errors – so annoying for an author! – have led to two pairs of wrongly captioned pictures (Masked/Red-footed Boobies, and Willet/Lesser Yellowlegs). The front cover illustration – a lovely parrot – is not identified anywhere in the book, and I find it a pity that, although no fewer than 103 species are illustrated, nowhere is it mentioned in the text whether a species is illustrated or not, leaving the reader to find out.

To sum up, a useful and much needed book, which in many respects amplifies Bond's outdated work in the region; but not without its flaws, some of which could have been avoided.

Richard French