

## BOOK REVIEWS

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DUNNE, P. & KALRSON, K.T. (2017). *Birds of prey. Hawks, Eagles, Falcons and Vultures of North America*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston. 305pp. ISBN 978-0-544-01844-0.

A handy little compilation of 34 species that includes three species of vulture: Black and Turkey Vultures, and California Condor. The accounts are ‘peppered’ with many striking photos, there being 18 of the vultures. Each species is described under 13 heads, with the condor having an extra “Road to recovery”. Here there is a lovely photo of a juvenile condor perched on the rim of the Grand Canyon, where the “grandeur matches the bird”; it has no tags or rings and was therefore hatched in the wild (2014). The accounts are quite comprehensive and lively, but there are two curious slip-ups with scientific names, on pp. 262 and 263, and surely the “average season total at Veracruz” is more than 200 000 birds? Nevertheless, a well-illustrated summary of each species.

FALLON, K. (2017). *Vulture: the private life of an unloved bird*. ForeEdge, Lebanon (New Hampshire, USA). 232pp. ISBN 9781611689716.

Katie is a bird rehabilitator in West Virginia, and is in love with Turkey Vultures, especially *septentrionalis* of eastern North America. She writes rather lyrically about this “perfect creature”. Often she refers to the scientific literature, and very often she quotes paragraphs and lines from Keith Bildstein of Hawk Mountain Sanctuary. (In addition the book is dedicated to Lindsay Oaks). She takes us through a year in the life of a Turkey Vulture, migration, wintering, breeding, etc., and there are 24 black-and-white photographs to illustrate these topics. The book is biologically accurate.

As a rehabilitator she tells several stories of injured/sick Turkey Vultures and her efforts - with those of her veterinarian husband - to revive them; regretfully many have to be euthanased. She also tells us of the “Welcome Back, Buzzards” celebration at the Boyce Thompson Arboretum State Park in Arizona, going on for 20 years. And the “Return of the Buzzards” celebration in Hinckley, Ohio, going on for more than 50 years, having started in 1957! And very briefly the “little-known celebration” of the International Vulture Awareness Day. Meadowcroft Rockshelter (Pennsylvania) and its human artefacts dated from 16 000 years ago, allows her to write about fossil vultures and lead poisoning. She tells us about Radford (Virginia) and Gettysburg (Pennsylvania). Altogether an unusual and rather fascinating account of the vulture, and the many humans it has affected. Most of her stories were certainly unknown to me.

GOODWIN, W. (2018). *Birds. Messengers in Zimbabwean folklore*. Self-published. No ISBN number. R200.

A very neat little book that includes many species of birds. The Cape Griffon and White-backed Vulture are depicted, with a page of text on “Vultures”. They are “widely considered” to have clairvoyant powers. The modern-day problem of poisoning the vultures, both intentional and unintentional, is highlighted. The introduction has sections on the tribes, and the traditional beliefs.

MARNEWICK, M.D., RETIEF, E.F., THERON, N.T., WRIGHT, D.R. & ANDERSON, T.A. (2015). *Important bird and biodiversity areas of South Africa*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. Birdlife South Africa, Johannesburg. 256 pp. ISBN 978-0-620-67427-0.

What a marvellous compilation, and surely acting as a benchmark! In colour throughout, with a Cape Griffon (herein Vulture) soaring at Giant’s Castle, Drakensberg, on the cover. There are now 112 Areas, after various amendments from the 1<sup>st</sup> edition (Barnes, 1998), being 98 global and 14 ‘sub-regional’ Areas. They are present in all nine provinces, from three in Gauteng to 29 in KwaZulu-Natal. Each account has a size in hectares, a very neat map, a detailed site description (which includes habitats and average rainfall), a section on birds, on IBA “trigger species”, and on conservation issues (threats and action). Most accounts also include a photo of a bird, or a habitat. These all add up to detailed and readable descriptions, quite wonderful. “Trigger species” are the key species for which the site was recognised, and also population numbers if the count was recent - this is particularly so for seabirds, waterbirds and the Cape Griffon.

Among all the 112 Areas, no less than 20 include the Cape Griffon as a trigger species, 13 include the White-backed Vulture (not by any means fully overlapping), six include the Lappet-faced Vulture, four include the White-headed Vulture, three include the Bearded Vulture (herein considered a “regionally threatened” species), and only one includes the Hooded Vulture. Some Areas are recognised specifically because of the vultures there, such as Colleywobbles and Dronfield.

The book has some pages of Introduction, and at the end the Acronyms and 14 pages of References. Altogether a *tour de force*.

SNYDER, N.R.F. and SNYDER, H.A. (2005). *Introduction to the California Condor*. University of California Press, Berkeley. 271 pp. ISBN 0-520-24256-4. £12.50.

A very small-sized book, no. 81 in the California natural history guides. It comprises ten chapters, starting with ‘Giant scavengers’, moving through “Studies of the decline in the 1980s”, and finishing on “Condor conservation in a changing world”. The book is very well illustrated with 101 photographs and four maps, and also well written even in sections such as “Scavenging as a lifestyle”. It gives some historical accounts in three chapters, but is mainly focused on the biology of the bird (three chapters) and the recent efforts from 1980 that the Snyders (and John Ogden and many others) were particularly involved in (four chapters).

In ch.5 “What caused the historical decline? Early hypotheses”, the authors discuss many impacts that the condors suffered. These were: shooting, poisoning, food scarcity, human disturbance of nesting areas, DDE contamination, collisions, calcium stress, habitat loss, and other miscellaneous stresses

(surface oil deposits, use by native American tribes, fire in the chaparral). Phew! But as the authors repeatedly remark, with only one person studying and managing the Condor for years - Koford, Sibley, Wilbur - it was not possible to assemble rigorous evidence for any of these. Thus the “most important threats” were missed. Then in 1980, with the arrival of Ogden and Snyder and their teams, “intensive radiotelemetry” (too early for satellite tracking!) and “massive efforts to find and study all nesting pairs” were started.

In 1984 a radio-telemetered Condor was found dead of lead poisoning, and within a year or two three more such mortalities were recovered. The authors give a blow-by-blow account of the realisation that lead poisoning might have been the most important impact on the wild Condors. By April 1987, the last wild Condor was captured and put into captivity, the whole species (27 birds) was now behind bars. In ch. 8 (“Captive breeding”) and ch. 9 (“Releases into the wild”) the authors give a good account of this progress. They note that as yet “no thoroughly naturalistic releases” (p. 220) have been done, and this is surely the end-objective.

Finally in ch. 10 (“Condor conservation in a changing world”) the authors offer some potential solutions to the lead problem. They also worry about the quality of birds against the quantity of birds released; the invasion into the USA of West Nile Virus; and the mounting cost of the programme.

This book is a great read, from two of the major researchers then working to save the California Condor from extinction. So far, so good!

WILBUR, S.R. [2012]. *Nine feet from tip to tip. The California condor through history*. Symbiosis Books, Gresham (Oregon, USA). 355 pp. ISBN 978-0-9651263-4-2. US\$18.95.

Wilbur was the USFWS biologist on the condor from 1970 to 1980, between Fred Sibley and Noel Snyder. In 1970 also, he began his historical research on the bird, which has been ongoing for 40 years. The result is this paperback volume, which is fun to read and full of information on the bird, from “before history” right up to the beginnings of the captive breeding programme in the early 1980s. For this study Wilbur found nearly 2000 written items on the California condor (including many newspaper articles) and another nearly 1000 items of relevance. He credits Harry Harris, Carl Koford and Fred Sibley with having started the historical process before him - he himself wants to deal with the “incomplete, misinterpreted, and sometimes erroneous information” that is out there.

The book is divided into 26 chapters plus “Afterthoughts”, with some chapter headings as “Doctor Taylor of Monterey”, “Quills of gold”, “King of the condor collectors”, “Sick and injured”, etc. These give a marvellous coverage to individual and public interest in the condor, research on it, and eventually management actions. Curiously the USFWS itself was a real late-comer to condor concerns, with initiative for this action accorded to R.C. Erickson in 1965, from the HQ in Patuxent. This was for an “endangered wildlife research program”.

There are quite a lot of spelling mistakes in the text, and one major omission at the end of ch. 17. On p. 234 a 60<sup>th</sup> reference is cited but on p. 239 only 59 are listed. It gives the impression that the book was perhaps hurriedly assembled, or that there was no editor. Indeed Symbiosis Books is Wilbur’s own publishing company. (i) The really major omission for me in this history of the California condor is that there is absolutely no mention of the annual cooperative surveys of the bird that were started in October

1965 (Malette and Borneman, 1966, *California Fish and Game* 52: 185-203), under the supervision of the newly formed Condor Survey Committee. They continued for about 15 years. (ii) There is sparse mention of the California Condor Technical Committee which produced a “recovery plan” for the bird in 1974, by a team of six persons chaired by Wilbur. In fact this was the first such species plan approved by the USFWS. The Committee’s efforts in this regard are ongoing. (iii) Many years ago Wilbur was of the opinion that “plumage and molt characteristics” were not sufficiently reliable to identify individual birds (1975, *California Fish and Game* 61: 144-148). This is contrary to later work by Snyder and Johnson (e.g. 1985, *Condor* 87: 1-13). Some discussion of this topic was warranted.

In ch. 23, “Sick and injured”, Wilbur deals with lead poisoning, among other environmental contaminants. He doubts that mule deer are a substantial food source, and also doubts that condors feed heavily on “gut piles” from the hunted deer. “So condors must be acquiring lead in substantial amounts” elsewhere. Like all the other chapters, this is a very considered and interesting account, and well referenced, with 29 citations - Wilbur is not disputing that lead poisoning occurs, but seriously wonders about its actual impact on the condor population.

Eventually, on p. 331, Wilbur comes up with a “hypothesis”. He proposes that “at least two subpopulations of condors exist”, that is a Sespe-Sierra group and a Coast Range group. It’s a shame that not enough transmitters were put onto birds in order to test this idea thoroughly.

Finally, the book is accompanied by a CD. This holds a copy of the 355-page book, and a “Vol. 2” with three Appendices, being the raw data: A - California condor mortality records, 458 of them; B - CC eggs taken by collectors, 80 examples; C - CC bibliography. This last ends with one reference in 2012. In total Vol. 2 spans 574 pages. I thought this CD was a very creditable effort at making available Wilbur’s set of raw data. Each entry in the three Appendices, incidentally, has a comment or two by him.

Like his previous book *Condor tales* (reviewed in *Vulture News*, 2014, 67: 74-76), *Nine feet from tip to tip* is a very good read, and an important book. It is (almost) a blow-by-blow account of the trials and tribulations of the California Condor. I doubt that such a treatment could be given to any other vulture.

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