

# Reviews

## Puffins

By Euan Dunn

Bloomsbury, 2014; Softback, 128 pp; numerous colour illustrations

ISBN 978-1-4729-0354-9 Subbuteo code M24075

£9.99 **BB Bookshop price £9.00**

There can be few birds so easily identified, so loved and so very special as the Puffin *Fratercula arctica*. As the author says, 'A major Puffin colony, pulsing with movement, colour, sound and smell, all part of the everyday drama of raising offspring, is one of the most exhilarating assaults on the senses these islands can offer.' I can only agree, having been fortunate to live for seven years within the Puffin colony on Skomer, Pembrokeshire, the largest colony in Wales. Puffins continually perched on our roof – what better vantage point for a rapid take-off? They even occasionally came down the chimney, and being confronted by an angry, soot-covered Puffin is quite an experience. Most exciting of all, however, was when, after a winter at sea, the Puffins returned and the first landings took place. The previously empty slopes around our home suddenly becoming a wonderful hive of activity. Indeed, it was on Skomer, and earlier on nearby Skokholm, that R. M. Lockley carried out research into the life history of Puffins and subsequently wrote his monograph, *Puffins*, published in 1953. Unfortunately, his work is not even mentioned in the present volume.

The last census of Puffins took place in 2000 when the British and Irish population was esti-

mated at just over 600,000 pairs, of which 82% were in Scotland, the largest concentration being about 136,000 pairs on St Kilda. This and other remote islands may be difficult to reach, though, and the author provides much information on more accessible, if smaller, colonies including some at mainland sites like Bempton Cliffs in Yorkshire.

Puffins are ashore from early April until early August, and for the rest of the year we knew almost nothing about their lives. But the recent use of geolocators is changing that and starting to reveal extraordinary new information. Perhaps none more so than that some Puffins from southwest Ireland cross the Atlantic to waters around Labrador and Newfoundland to feed, before returning after between two to six weeks.

A more comprehensive index would have been helpful. However, this lavishly illustrated book packed with information and modestly priced makes an ideal present, especially for someone who has still to visit a Puffin colony. And surely you will want one for your own shelves as well.

*David Saunders*



## Arran Bird Atlas 2007–2012: mapping the breeding and wintering birds of Arran

By Jim Cassels

Arran Natural History Society and the SOC, 2014

Pbk, 158pp; photographs, maps and tables

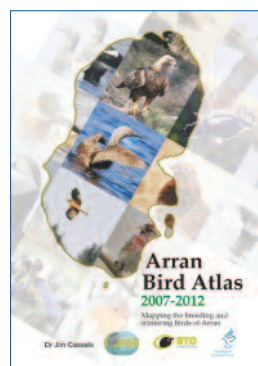
ISBN 978-0-9512139-5-7 Subbuteo code 1213957

£8.00 **BB Bookshop price £7.00**

This is an attractively priced but basic report on a local atlas project. The whole of the island of Arran, which lies in the Firth of Clyde, was surveyed at the tetrad scale (139 tetrads) in parallel with the national *Bird Atlas 2007–11* – plus an additional year to complete the coverage. This is the first time that an atlas at this scale has been attempted on Arran and so it provides a baseline for any future work. Jim Cassels deserves great praise for his hard

work to ensure that the fieldwork was completed. Arran is often said to be 'Scotland in miniature' and surveying the mountainous interior in the winter proved to be quite a challenge.

The book provides an attractive and colourful overview of the island's breeding and wintering



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avifauna, with all species illustrated with a small photograph. All but the rarest species have a tetrad-scale map showing breeding period and/or winter distribution, and a simple table showing the number of tetrads in which the species was recorded, subdivided by the level of evidence for the breeding-season records. The short introductory chapters describe the project and the habitats of Arran.

The species texts are very brief and provide no interpretation of the maps – they are really just status comments. The introductory chapters present the facts but again do not attempt any analysis. This will satisfy casual readers and visitors to the island, but I found the lack of depth disap-

pointing; I would like to understand how the distributions relate to the geography of the island. Why do some species, such as Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*, Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix* and Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*, occur in some woodlands but not others, for instance? There would have been ample room to include even just one sentence to help bring the maps alive. This local atlas does not match the professional appearance of some of those larger volumes already published, but as an easy reference for those familiar with the island it would be a useful companion for any visit.

Mark Holling

## Claxton: field notes from a small planet

By Mark Cocker

Jonathan Cape, 2014

Hbk; xii + 240pp

ISBN 978-0224-09965-3 Subbuteo code 4099653

£14.99 **BB Bookshop price £13.50**

To use an optical analogy, Mark Cocker has great depth of field. His last book was the monumental *Birds and People* (2013), a panoramic survey of cultural responses to birds from all round the world; but he now focuses down on the wildlife in just one small parish – the village of Claxton in Norfolk, where he has lived for the last 12 years. Readers will already have a sense of this area and what it means to him from his earlier *Crow Country* (2007) and from his regular *Guardian* ‘Country Diary’ contributions. Indeed, *Claxton* largely consists of a selection of these diary pieces, now further shaped and polished and strung like a set of exquisite bright beads on the line of a year’s calendar. This is the art of the miniaturist, a concentration of perception and its expression that evokes the universal from the closely observed particular. It is the prose equivalent of the Haiku.

The particulars in question are very various. Birds feature prominently, of course: in the winter months the local Barn Owls, Peregrines and the famous gatherings of Rooks are part of his regular cast, along with visiting Bewick’s Swans with their ‘woodwind calls ... rather resembling wind chimes’; and through the year’s turning we meet the changing succession of spring, summer, autumn and then again winter migrants. Occasionally there are rarer visitors, but the whole emphasis is on the ordinary, or rather the extraordinary *in* the ordinary – like the wonderful epiphany of the Spotted Flycatcher in his garden on 3rd September,

‘duller than any Dunnock’ but ‘a rainbow of colour expressed in movement’. But birds are only the more conspicuous players among the *dramatis personae* of the village year. Cocker has made himself – has been inspired to become – an all-round naturalist, who now takes as much delight in St Mark’s Flies and Meadow Browns as in Marsh Harriers. We encounter all these and more in his sharp-eyed, inquisitive company.

The seasonal cycle of the year provides the structure for the book, in which the pieces are arranged in chronological order in twelve chapters, one for each month. One can therefore drop in anywhere and get a prompt about what to look out for that week in one’s own patch. I tested this while contemplating this review – and there in his 26th August entry was a captivating account of the Poplar Hawk-moth I had just caught that day in my own moth trap (‘a compound of the monstrous and of perfection’). Each week offers a new discovery, or a new perception of familiar experiences.

But one of the most important elements of this book is of a different kind and comes right at the end – his Claxton Parish Species List, covering all the taxa he has so far identified in his village. This should perhaps have been given more prominence in the publisher’s blurb, since it is really more like the vertebrae of the book than its appendix. Lists have always been important to naturalists, not just for the harmless fun of the tally stick, but as an



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