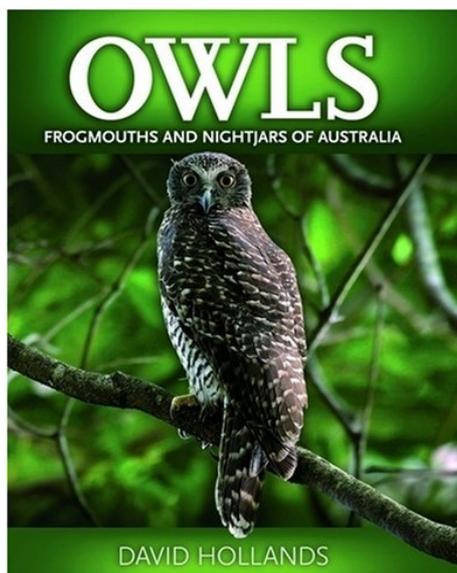


## Some Recent Natural History Publications #11 November 2008

\*\*\*\*\*

### *Owls, Frogmouths and Nightjars of Australia*

David Hollands. Blooming Books. 336 pages. RRP \$59.95



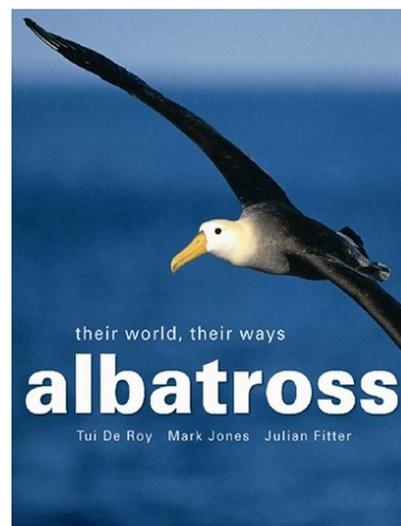
David Hollands is now a well-established and highly respected feature of the Australian bird photography and field studies landscape. I was a bit startled to realise that his *Birds of the Night*, the precursor to this volume and well-browsed on my shelf, appeared way back in 1991. His books are always very personal, in part because of his seemingly indefatigable energy and willingness to spend countless hours and days (or nights in this case) in gaining great familiarity with his subjects. As a result, he has studied and photographed at the nest all but two of the species in this book, a remarkable achievement in itself. The photos moreover would be truly superb, even if they had been of commoner and day time species. Not a great fan of heights myself, I shudder at the image of Hollands perched high in the rainforest canopy opposite a Lesser Sooty Owl nest, on a flimsy tower and platform comprising slender cut poles nailed together, or swinging about while climbing a 25 metre free-swinging ladder into the crown of a huge old eucalypt. Each species receives its own chapter; very sensibly he does not try

to repeat information available from elsewhere, but focusses on his own, often fascinating, observations and experiences. His very attractive approach is summarised in a couple of quotes from the book. "No matter how much we know in nature, there is always something still to learn." "... a Boobook calling loudly in the trees outside. Life is the richer for it being there." Indeed. One could say something similar about this book. A word in an ear about Christmas presents might not go astray here.

### *Albatross; their world, their way*

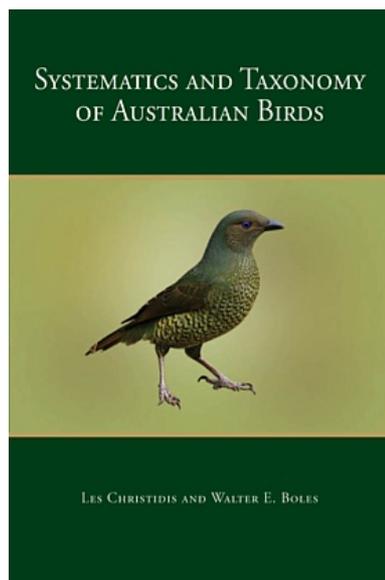
Tui De Roy, Mark Jones and Julian Fitter. CSIRO Publishing. 240 pages. RRP \$79.95

There are analogies between this book and the previous, in its focus on one group of birds, its often personal approach and emphasis on photography. In this case though the stage is all of the world's oceans, and there are many contributors to the text, chapters being written by relevant authorities. The book is both a celebration of the wonder of the great ocean roamers, and a loud and clear warning of impending catastrophe for most of the world's albatross species, primarily due to human fishing activities. De Roy's photographs are simply and breathtakingly glorious and the text is of the highest quality. The book opens with a long section introducing the albatrosses, with a chapter on each of the eight major sub-groups. This section is reminiscent of Hollands' personalised approach, and underlines the authors' detailed knowledge of and passion for the birds. It is followed by a fascinating series of essays on aspects of albatross conservation, and ends with a most informative profile of each species, like a very extended field guide entry. The price is a bit intimidating, but if you can manage it there is a wealth of beauty and knowledge here, albeit tempered with a sense of impending dread. Part of the message though is that it doesn't have to be that way.



### *Systematics and Taxonomy of Australian Birds*

Les Christidis and Walter Boles. CSIRO Publishing. 277 pages. RRP \$49.95



It is fair to say that probably everyone who has been hanging out for this book for some time – and it would be a surprise to ‘normal’ people to know how many of us there are – already knows about it. On the other hand, if you’re not already aware of it you’re probably not going to be very interested... Nonetheless it is a most significant publication within its field and it would be remiss of me not to note its long-awaited and somewhat delayed appearance. It is a very detailed and scholarly compendium of all recent literature relevant to the title by two very experienced and respected Australian bird taxonomists. Its influence is greatly magnified by the fact that Birds Australia has chosen to adopt Christidis and Boles’ conclusions as their standard for Australian bird taxonomy, as they did for the authors’ previous such publication, in 1994. This standardisation affects everything from twitchers’ life totals to the nomenclature required to be used in the publications of most if not all Australian birding organisations. They do not always set out their reasons, which can be frustrating; I’d still like to know why Nullarbor Quail-thrush is not a separate species for instance, though I guess I’m expected to read the primary material, which is

thoroughly referenced. I’m not a great fan of the recent trend of indexing common names by starting at the beginning eg Chestnut Quail-thrush, rather than Quail-thrush, Chestnut, especially if you’re interested in a group rather than a particular species. However, if you’re serious about understanding the relationships of Australian birds you need this book (and probably have it). If not, there are plenty of other good bird books to read!

### *Koala; a historical biography*

Ann Moyal. CSIRO Publishing. 246 pages. RRP \$39.95

For one such as I who is fascinated by the history of Australian biology, this is exactly the sort of book I love and Canberra science historian Ann Moyal does it very well. This is effectively another in a series that began in 2001 with her *Platypus* and follows the same general format. It is a wonderfully well planned, researched and written compendium of information about Koalas *per se*, and about Koalas and their generally unhappy relationship with people. As ever we learn a great deal about ourselves in the process, including what she is able to glean about the interaction of Koalas and Aboriginal people. In addition she looks at the species from the points of view of non-indigenous Australian art, literature, study, shockingly ruthless and brutal exploitation and finally conservation. There is also a very good summary chapter on koala anatomy and biology, nicely entitled *Being and Doing*. This book earns its place either on your history or your mammal books shelf. Start with it on the bedside table though.

