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A hardcore guide to Africa

a review by **Dragan Simić**

The Birder's Guide to Africa

by **Michael Mills**

Go-Away-Birding, 2017

544 pages, softcover

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“What happened?”
“He psyched me out. Made me seasick. I think he thinks I’m doing a Big Year. That is hardcore.”

“Are you doing a Big Year?”

“No. You?”

Me? No. But only because I lack the funds. Otherwise, I would become the first birder with mobility issues to do a Big Year in Africa. Oh, Africa... We have a history together, that continent and I. Sometimes hard and bitter, sometimes smooth and seductive. On that sunny day of a long-gone June, between two orange-blossoming aloe trees on a manicured lawn in front of an airport building, the Cape Glossy Starling became my first ever bird on African soil. Oh, Africa...

Open in front of me is *The Birder's Guide to Africa* by Michael Mills, holder of a master's degree in Conservation Biology and a freelance bird guide, working mostly with the tour company Birding Africa. The *Guide* is illustrated with photographs by Tasso Leventis, a London businessman whose conservation work in Africa has included the establishment of an avian research institute in Nigeria.

It has been 23 years since Nigel Wheatley's *Where to Watch Birds in Africa* appeared, and I expected from this new volume a generally similar concept filled with updated content. No: Not just the content but the very concept of this guide is something entirely different.

Bird books are getting heavier every year, yet every new

publication surprises me in successfully outweighing its predecessors. *The Birder's Guide to Africa* is no exception. Even in paperback it weighs close to three pounds. This is not a book you would want to carry along on a multi-country tour of Africa. It is the kind of book you study at home when deciding when to travel, which sites to visit, and what specialties to hope for.

The Birder's Guide is the first concise summary of birding possibilities, challenges, and opportunities offered by all of Africa and its islands. The book's three main parts comprise accounts for all 68 territories in the region, entries for all 142 of Africa's bird families, and treatment of all 2,792 bird species.

In other words, in 544 pages, this book covers it all.

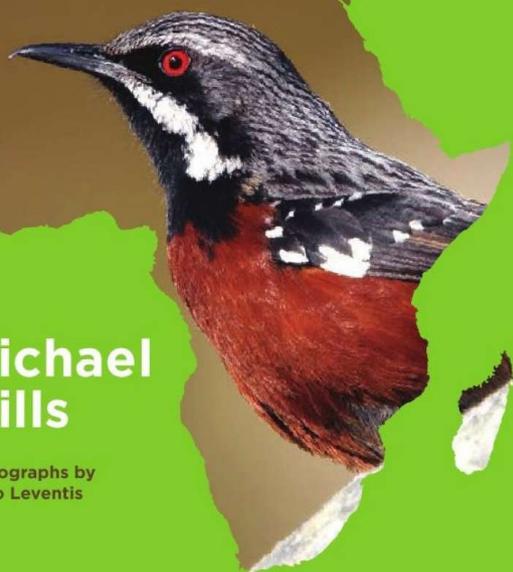
The first thing to draw your attention in the introductory chapter are the “heat maps.” These maps indicate graphically the attractiveness of each country or island to different kinds of birders: the redder, or “hotter,” a jurisdiction is colored on the map, the more appealing it will be to, for example, a hardcore lister, a general natural history tourist, or a birder on a tight budget. Another map indicates poorly known, inadequately birded destinations most likely to be of interest to intrepid birding explorers or students and professionals in search of still unanswered questions. These maps are a first strong visual aid in making up your mind—or just helping you daydream of Africa on a snowy northern winter afternoon.

The 108 pages of country accounts provide lists of key birds and when to see them, descriptions of habitats and main birding areas, and more general travel information about safety, money, geography, and climate, along with suggestions for recommended field, site, and travel guides, DVDs, smartphone apps, websites, and so on.

The family accounts, running to 150 pages, are the least dry, sometimes even poetic, texts in this very comprehensive book. Perhaps that shouldn't be much of a surprise, given that the African region is home to more than half of all bird families worldwide, making it the richest continent when measured by families and orders. These accounts are the only illustrated section in the book; that sudden outburst of color looks a bit strange against the rest of the pages. Some of Leventis's photos are great, others more documentary.

While the countries are dispensed with in a fifth of the

The Birder's Guide to Africa



Michael
Mills

Photographs by
Tasso Leventis

book, the bird species accounts occupy half of it. These 244 pages will be the most exciting chapter for many readers. Every single one of the 2,792 species recorded in Africa, 26% of the world's total, is given up to 17 lines of text describing its status, abundance, and ease of finding; for each, its range and habitats are described, and the best places to look for it are indicated. These accounts also discuss the latest splits, potential splits, proposed lumps, and the status of endemic subspecies.

Finally, the short back matter includes indexes of countries, families and species, along with useful lists of books, websites and email groups, applications, and local organizations.

Let's try to use the book to help me plan my Big Year in Africa. With mobility issues, I would want to narrow my focus from all bird species to only one group, say, sunbirds. The *Guide's* family account tells us that there are 91 species of IOC-recognized sunbirds in Africa and on its islands, a

good percentage of the 143 worldwide; 90 of Africa's species are endemic. Beautiful and charming, the highest level of endemism, lots of opportunities for great photos—but in all honesty, too easy, not enough of a challenge.

So let's shift the focus to something with real challenge, something nocturnal perhaps. Owls? Out of 218 species worldwide, 49 occur in Africa, 39 of them endemics. They are way harder to find. The family account says that "of all bird families in the region with more than 25 species, seeing a high proportion of owls is the most challenging." Now we're talking! Owls!

But going back to the matter of funds I mentioned earlier, let's assume that I cannot afford flights to various islands and so have chosen to bird only the mainland. And being familiar with the European owls, I do not feel like chasing those species through northern Africa.

How many Afrotropical species are left? In the species accounts we find that some 31 species inhabit the continent south of the Sahara. One of them, though, is the Little Owl of Eurasia, which reaches the southernmost part of its range in Somalia. This one is among the most common owls of southern Europe, and I don't feel like facing the safety risks in its African range. And so I am left with a manageable 30 species. What next?

Going through the species accounts, I soon realize that almost half of those 30 are relatively widespread and that I should focus my efforts on the other half. There are several endemic species with extremely small ranges, among them the Abyssinian Long-eared Owl and Sokoke and Sandy scops-owls. In the search for those and other range-restricted species, I should stand a fair chance of seeing the more widespread 14.

Now is the time to turn to the country accounts. Southern and East Africa are mostly well developed, peaceful, and stable, and can be crisscrossed easily—by African standards at least. But there are about ten owl species that inhabit only or mostly Central and West Africa. Most of those countries being off limits for safety reasons, their owls will be particularly difficult to find. Among the reasonably developed and fairly stable countries my choice would be Ghana, closely followed by Gabon, Senegal, and the Gambia.

Back to range-restricted endemics. The Sokoke Scops-Owl, the *Guide* says, lives in coastal forests at the Kenya-Tanzania border, with the most reliable area being the Arabuko-Sokoke forest in Kenya. The rare Usambara Eagle-Owl lives in central Tanzania, with the best chances in Am-

ani in the East Usambaras. The Abyssinian Long-eared Owl inhabits mountain forests of Ethiopia, Uganda, and Kenya; the most reliable area is the Bale Mountains of Ethiopia. The Sandy Scops-Owl, rare anywhere in its Central and West African range, can sometimes be seen in Ankasa in Ghana. And the Albertine Owlet is a rare species of montane forests of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda; the *Guide* gives us slim chances in safe and developed Rwanda, better chances in Itombwe in eastern Congo.

Add to these rarities a real gem, the Congo Bay-Owl, a very rare bird, found twice, in the 1950s and the 1990s, in the forests of the Itombwe Mountains, the only confirmed sightings ever. Possible sightings in Burundi and birds heard in Rwanda remain unsubstantiated; hence, the best chances are in Itombwe, currently a dangerous place to visit, the *Guide* warns. Who in their right mind would even consider looking for the Congo Bay-Owl? Then again, sanity is overrated: You'll never find the bird unless you search for it, however insane it may sound.

In addition to the Sandy Scops-Owl, Ghana offers the African Scops-Owl, African Wood-Owl, and Red-chested and Pearl-spotted owlets; Akun, Fraser's, Verreaux's, and Grayish eagle-owls; Pel's and Rufous fishing-owls; and the elusive Sjostedt's Owlet.

Pel's Fishing-Owls and Verreaux's Eagle-Owls can also be found in southern Africa; it is best to look for them in Namibia and Botswana, according to the *Guide*, together with the Spotted Eagle-Owl, [Western] Barn Owl, African Scops-Owl, Southern White-faced Owl, African Wood-Owl, and Pearl-spotted and African Barred owlets.

To cut costs I will focus on fewer countries. For Central and West African species: Ghana. For southern birds: mostly Namibia and Botswana, together with a few more—Cape Eagle-Owl, African Grass-Owl, Marsh Owl—in South Africa. About 22 species to hope for in those two regions...so back to East Africa.

Besides endemics such as the Sokoke Scops-Owl, Usambara Eagle-Owl, and Albertine Owlet, East Africa offers a second chance for some of above, including the [Western] Barn Owl, African Grass-Owl, Marsh Owl, African Wood-Owl, Pel's Fishing-Owl (widespread, but northern Botswana offers the best chances), African Scops-Owl, Cape, Spotted and Verreaux's eagle-owls, and Pearl-spotted and African Barred owlets. While most of these can be found region-wide, finding the endemics would require a tour combining Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Rwanda.

And, voilà, the outline of my strigid Big Year is here. No, the *Guide* doesn't offer precise and detailed info on how to reach a particular site, which signs to look for, and where to veer left until you get to... Practical site-specific information like that changes from year to year, quickly becoming outdated. Classic site guides covering a country or two have their uses, but such books simply cannot provide such a treasure trove of information on a continental scale. If you want a traditional site guide, do not buy *The Birder's Guide to Africa*. But for what it is and what it is intended to do, this book is excellent. The concept is refreshingly new, giving you all the basic information and plenty of site names and other keywords to google further.

The Birder's Guide to Africa covers all you ever wanted to know, but had no one to ask. It also describes what you may need before you even know you need it. Tightly squeezed, yes, but this book offers no-nonsense, up-to-date coverage of an entire continent and its islands. Impressive.

Recommended citation

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Obsessed with pretty things with feathers

a review by **Ellen Paul**

The Feather Thief: Beauty, Obsession, and the Natural History Heist of the Century

by **Kirk Wallace Johnson**

Viking Press, 2018

308 pages, hardcover

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Edwin Rist. The name sounds Victorian. It sounds nefarious. It fits a man who would skulk through the dark streets of Tring, England, where the Victorian-era home of the second Lord Rothschild housed the bird collection of London's Museum of Natural History. Using a glass cutter—a low-tech Victorian-era invention—Rist tried to break a back window. When that failed, he used a no-tech rock. Once inside the museum, he purloined nearly three hundred bird skins, including some collected by the Victorian-era naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace on his excursion to the Malay Archipelago.