

Book Reviews

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BROWN, E. (2017). *Percy the victorious vulture*. Hawk Mountain Sanctuary Association, Kempton, PA, USA. 29 pp. ISBN 978-0-692-89216-9.

Cute story of Percy the Black Vulture, hatched in the Appalachian Mountains, and caught and wing-tagged by a Conservation Science Trainee. Then he got hit by a truck while feeding on roadkill. But managed to survive. Nice art work by Lauren Beauchner. Also with two pages on “The importance of vultures” by Zoey Greenberg. (With thanks to Keith Bildstein for sending this booklet to me).

(www.hawkmountain.org)

CLARK, W.S. & DAVIES, R. (2018). *African raptors*. Helm, London. 336 pp. ISBN 978-0-7136-6538-3.

One can say, at last this book is with us! It covers the diurnal birds of prey of the African mainland, 106 species in all. There are 11 species of vulture, occupying plates 6 to 11 and pages 149 to 170. Each species therefore has about two pages of text, divided into 13 or 14 sections, e.g. Identification, Behaviour, Description, and each account also has a coloured map of distribution in Africa and two to four coloured photographs. These coloured photos in particular are usually excellent and comprise both standing and flying birds. I noticed however, that both photos on p. 157 are of adults (the lower is not a juvenile), the upper photo on p. 161 is an immature (look at the ruff), the left photo on p. 163 is a young immature not a juvenile (yellowing bill and rounded coverts), and the bottom left photo on p. 170 is an immature (dark crown).

The map of Africa on p. 14 has seven colours to show the distributions of the birds, three of which show “sparse” sightings. The big problem here is that there is no grey colour being defined: ten of the vultures have patches of grey on their maps. For example, the Bearded Vulture on p. 152 shows that ‘infamous’ spot on the Southern Rhodesia-Moçambique border from a hundred years ago (should be an X if anything). The map rightly shows the new countries of Eritrea (1993) and South Sudan (2011), but wrongly considers Western Sahara to be a part of occupying Morocco (what is the wiggly line going through it, a road?), and there’s a new boundary in Somalia, separating off Somaliland (?). Nicely the map shows the White Nile and its tributary the Blue Nile, the Congo River and its tributaries the Ubangi and Lukuga (?), the Niger and its tributary the Benue, the Zambezi and its tributary the Shire, and the Orange River.

The texts are mostly up-to-date, with the Description section usually the longest. This is because there are extra sub-headings of second-plumage and older immature, etc. – vultures take up to six years (seven for *Gyps fulvus* the authors say) to reach adulthood by plumage. Such a detailed section is to be expected in a Helm Identification Guide. Nevertheless there are several ‘funnies’ in the Description sections, e.g. failure to note the green skin in juvenile White-backed Vultures (but shown in the photo on p. 159), failure

to note the white ‘dappling’ on the mantle of Lappet-faced Vultures. Two Latin (specific) names are wrongly given: *tracheliotus* instead of *tracheliotos*, even though *otos* is listed in the Etymology section!; and *rueppellii* instead of *rueppelli*.

Range maps are said to be up-to-date to March 2017. In view of the recent declines in some species, it must have been tricky to make some decisions. Is this what the grey colour means? – historical distribution? Again, there are some ‘funnies’ here, particularly for the Cinereous Vulture where the Status and Distribution section and the map fail to recognise the seeming re-invasion of Africa by the species. And also for Rüppell’s Griffon, where the map fails to mark the out-of-range ‘vagrants’.

And now to the Plates. Each species has between seven to 13 labelled paintings, usually against a grey or coloured backdrop/scene; I recognised the Serengeti plains, the Drakensberg escarpment, the strait of Gibraltar, Hell’s Gate, and Sossusvlei (or so I thought), which was a very nice touch. Opposite each plate is a page of “caption text”. While generally good and rather accurate, nevertheless overall they seemed dark, and in one or two cases (e.g. adult Griffon Vulture) indeed rather ‘muddy’. Adult vultures in particular are colourful and well-patterned birds. Usefully, each plate includes a “head-on” view of a flying/gliding/soaring adult. There are several points of detail in these plates that could be improved upon, but I will here mention only four: the text says that the adult Egyptian Vulture has “orange facial skin”, but the paintings are yellow; there is a pronounced pale ‘window’ on the underwings of the adult Hooded Vulture; the underwing of the adult Cape Vulture (whoops, sorry, Griffon) is a much more pronounced white ‘window’; the underside of the adult Lappet-faced Vulture in flight is more distinctly patterned and the white ‘trousers’ (here wrongly called “thighs” or “legs”) form a conspicuous ‘V’. It’s a pity that subspecies couldn’t have been more clearly depicted – Bearded Vulture, Rüppell’s Vulture (but don’t believe it myself), and Lappet-faced Vulture. (I have to say that my favourite artist remains Kim Franklin).

Incidentally, in all three large *Gyps* species (*coprotheres*, *fulvus*, *rueppelli*) the authors repeat the “griffon” naming problem of “some vulture researchers”; actually Bill Clark argued with me only, in the literature! To me they are all griffons, and excluding the White-backed Vulture.

In short, this is a very handy book to use, and being especially detailed on Status and Distribution (with a very detailed map), Behaviour, and Description, and in the Plates. I daresay, however, that it will be compared with *Sasol birds of prey of Africa and its islands* by Alan and Meg Kemp (1998). Not only does this latter book consider the islands, particularly Madagascar, but also includes 43 species of owls. Which one will be preferred?
