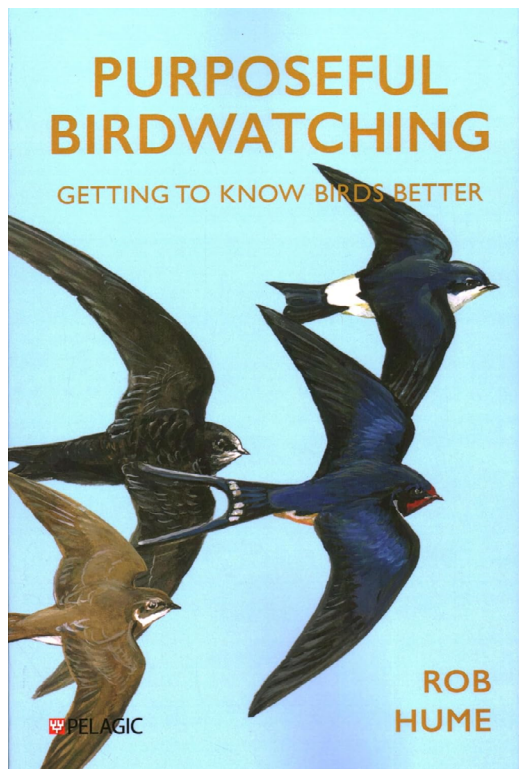


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A FINE ACCOUNT OF THE THRILL OF BIRDWATCHING



Hume R. 2024. Purposeful Birdwatching. Getting to know birds better. Pelagic Publishing, London. 290 pp., many b/w sketches by the author.

In the international ornithological panorama Rob Hume has the distinction of having published a considerable number of guides on bird identification and can be regarded as one of the leaders in committed and scientifically recognized birdwatching. Between 1989 and 2009 he was editor of *Birds*, the journal of the Royal Society of Protection of Birds, he was member and also chairman of the British Birds Rarities Committee, and member of the editorial board of the scientific journal *British Birds*. He has led wildlife holidays in various European countries, Israel and Africa and has birdwatched widely in Europe, India, Sri Lanka, Australia, the Caribbean and North America. His ability to make improvised sketches of birds and the habitats in which they live is widely known and is perhaps the distinguishing feature of his guides and articles. These sketches in some cases have toured the world, as, for example, those of the immature and adult roseate tern

This book is in a way a kind of autobiography, in which the author recounts his most significant observations, the emotions he felt the first time he observed certain bird species and the places where he went birdwatching, observing sometimes very unexpected species. It is pos-

sible to understand the differences between the original text and the text from the author's notes, because they have different characters. Reading this text is very instructive, not so much to learn how to distinguish related species in the wild (for this there are already excellent guides, even by Rob Hume himself), but to understand how serious and profitable birdwatching should be done, what the ethics and philosophy of this activity that involves thousands of people worldwide are.

'*Anything can happen*' he writes about his observation in a October day of a Cory's shearwater sitting on a shingle shore in bright sunshine, the first and for many years the only inland record in Britain. Very interesting is what he writes about royal and lesser crested terns: '*if at first you don't succeed*' mantra applies to them. Nevertheless, he reports his notes from Gambia, where he observed lesser crested, royal, sandwich and caspian terns; the notes suggest that lesser crested would be smaller-bodied than sandwich head-on, but bulkier and deeper-bodied in a side view, broader-winged and with a fractionally deeper and longer bill. Once again the notes taken during field observations and sketches come in handy for correct identification.

Another his interesting observation reported in the notes of the book occurred in Ireland, where Hume found a flock of small waders; one of them resulted to be a Baird's sandpiper, a pretty good American rarity, but another one was a white-rumped sandpiper, another accidental

American wader. The sketch of the two birds shows this excellent find and the small differences between them. Roosts of corvids are unusual, but the author records thousands of rooks and jackdaws, the total was in excess of 5,000, probably 6,000, predominantly jackdaws. The spectacle continued for a couple of years but has since dwindled; the periodic behavior of these birds to aggregate and form conspicuous flocks in roosts in some parts of the world remains unexplained.

Towards the end of the book, the author highlights the importance of consulting skins preserved in museums, where an ornithologist or simple birdwatcher can compare his own drawings, sketches and notes with the actual plumage of the preserved specimens.

Hume highlights also that an important aspect that should not be underestimated by the birdwatcher is the song of the birds; it is essential to recognize not only the songs but also the simple calls in order to understand whether you are looking at a common and widespread species or an exceptional visitor. The considerations on the last pages are somewhat sad in a way: 'Going through my old notebooks brings back so very many memories and experiences, some of which simply reinforce what we have lost'. And also: 'It always seems a great pity to me that [Black Grouses] are just thought of as game birds and hardly get the credit they deserve as wild beautiful, evocative birds on the hills, with their brilliant calls'. Even in the UK, the problem of hunting and all that goes with it (such as birds bred and

released as put and take game) is struggling to be resolved in a world with fewer and fewer birds for a variety of causes; however, hunting adds to these causes and can be the straw that breaks the camel's back.

This book was written by someone who has had a passion for ornithology since childhood, and on every page it shows this man's enormous passion for birdwatching, ornithology, and bird identification in the field. Reading it is a great pleasure for anyone with the same passion.

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