**(2): The field guides when you need them**

Some people get most of their information about birds from consulting a field guide. Different field guides are useful on different points. To test this I chose six points and then checked to see how much help each guide provided. The results are below.

*Q: What’s the difference in appearance between female Leaden and Satin Flycatchers?* All guides agree that the Leaden is paler (‘much’ – ***Slater***; ‘slightly’ – ***Morcombe***). Do not rely too much on the illustrations for the grey upperparts. In each guide the two species are shown as much more alike than the grey used for the *same* species in other guides. Two say the *Leaden’s* orange-buff breast is paler; ***Slater*** says the *Satin’s* is ‘slightly paler’ (as shown in the illustrations); ***S&D8*** says the Satin’s ‘may be brighter’. ***Slater*** says the Satin is ‘larger’. ***S&D8*** says the Satin is ‘smaller’, which, curiously, is not supported by the given measurements.

*Q: Do the variable underparts of the Painted Honeyeater indicate gender?* ***Slater1*** says female has ‘no streaks on flanks’; ***Slater2***, has no mention of streaks. ***Pizzey:*** no spots in female illustration; text – female ‘fewer spots’. ***Morcombe:***  indicates streaks on illustrated male; ‘females and immatures have plain white underparts’. ***S&D1***: female ‘no streaks on flank’ (as highlighted in the b&w illustration). ***S&D7/8***: female ‘underparts plain white’ (illustration shows a few dots on side of breast). [***HANZAB*** says *some* males have little or no spotting and, as regards spotting generally, females are as males. From this reviewer’s observations, some females have more spotting than some males.]

*Q: Is that a rusty colour on the breast of that Restless Flycatcher?* Answer: Quite possibly. To explain the illustrations, note that some guides recognise a northern sub-species, *nana*, as a separate species, ‘Paperbark Flycatcher’. ***Pizzey***: shows slight buff on adult, a little more on immature, none on *nana*; text - ‘often washed yellow-buff across breast’. ***Morcombe***: shows trace of buff on both races; text: - ‘both races ... may have a slight buff tint on breast, lost as fine buff feather tips wear’. ***Slater***: shows slight trace of buff on male, more on the female ‘paperbark form’; text - ‘faintly buff breast ... in female’ Juv: ‘buff breast’. ***S&D8***: shows no buff on adult male, buff on obviously young juvenile, no illustration of *nana*; text – ‘pale buff wash on breast variable’ Juv: ‘throat, upper breast, washed creamy buff’. What the guides do not bring out is that the ‘buff’ can be a pronounced rusty colour. ***HANZAB*** says: ‘orange-buff wash to breast appears slightly more prevalent in adult female compared with adult male’. ***DAB*** (Schodde & Mason) says of juveniles: ‘buff on the breast, which disappears with wear, may be carried into adulthood, more in females than males’.

*Q: How do you tell female Satin Bowerbirds from immature ones?* Possible indications are bill colour and breast plumage. Mature F has dark bill, yellow-green scalloped breast. However, younger immatures can resemble F. Male SBs do not get adult plumage until year 6 or 7. ***Pizzey***: 3 and 4 year males ‘acquire green throat ... bill progressively paler’ – shown well in illustrations. ***Morcombe***: year 3 males acquire ‘richer green throat’; year 4 ‘solid green band across breast’. F shown with ‘dark grey’ bill, but no illustration of immatures or mention of their bill colour.  ***Slater***: males in about year 4 get greenish unscalloped breast, bill becomes pale in about year 5; illustrations show F’s black bill, scalloped throat, immature male’s half-pale bill, green throat. ***S&D8***: Mentions dark bill of F; M immature ‘bill paler’, but no illustration of immature, and F is shown with *pale* grey bill. All except ***Morcombe*** mention the dark eye of young immatures, which might be helpful in distinguishing a bird of that age from an adult female.

*Q: How do you distinguish juvenile or immature bronze-cuckoos, Horsfield’s from Shining?* All guides mention faint or incomplete bars on underparts of both species, so the question is which guide has the most helpful illustrations. ***Morcombe*** has no illustrations of immatures at all. ***S&D8***has only small b&w drawings, not very helpful. ***Pizzey*** shows both immatures, appearing very similar, no doubt as in the field. ***Slater*** illustrations are best, drawing attention to similarity of Horsfield’s to Black-eared and drawing attention to rufous in tail of Horsfield’s.

*Q: How do you distinguish the two sub-species of Silvereye that occur in the Canberra area*? To make sense of this, the information in ***HANZAB*** and ***DAB*** is summarised first: W (local subspecies) has paler brownish flanks; yellowish throat. L (migrant) has darker (but variable) rust-brown flanks; less (but variable) yellow on (mainly side of) throat, but sometimes resembles W. ***Slater*** says some Ws are at most buff-flanked and the illustration shows these the palest mushroom, compared to L’s striking chestnut. L has white throat. ***Morcombe*** conveys the variation in L’s flanks, and a white throat, and shows very pale flanks for W. The ***Pizzey*** illustrations suffer in later printings from darkening to the point of muddiness, and early editions are better. These are good at showing both species’ flank colours for *dull* light, with again only a whitish throat for L. The illustrations in ***S&D8*** are better, but a bit yellowish overall. The L greyish throat is not caricatured, and L flanks are good, but not enough of W’s flanks are shown for comparison. To sum up, all guides make a brave effort on this point. However, they lack the space to show geographic and other variation *within* sub-species, and the consequent oversimplification can be misleading.

Conclusion: Abbreviation is the enemy of accuracy. If you want a reference that you can fit in your backpack or glove-box, don’t expect it to tell you everything you might want to know in the field. If a point is important to you, check it in something else before you have an argument about it.