

Birdwatch Bird Book of the Year

Dominic Mitchell looks at the best titles for birders in the past 12 months and announces the winner of our coveted annual title.

IT WAS ANOTHER excellent year for ornithological publishing, with a wealth of diverse, informative and attractive titles released during 2012. At the same time, the landscape is subtly changing, with a distinct shift away from the giants of the reference library to niche publishing.

For now at least, we have seen the end of the blockbuster handbook. Following the last edition of *Handbook of the Birds of the World* the previous year, 2012 saw no major volume published along the lines of the Lynx leviathan or its eminent forebears, *BWP*, *Birds of Africa* and *HANZAB*. Lynx will release a special volume in 2013 entitled *New Species and Global Index* as an update to the *HBW* series, but it will be the exception rather than the rule.

Instead, the ripening fruits of publishers' labours are often more specialist titles, for example niche field guides such as Helm's *Birds of Aruba, Curaçao and Bonaire* and the newly arrived *Birds of Central Asia*. These important releases are the first dedicated titles covering their respective areas, but nonetheless with a more restricted audience. Such niche publishing is made possible partly by the 'repurposing' of identification plates, an increasing trend which sees the same artwork reused and 'remixed' with new illustrations in different guides to help keep costs down.

At the same time Helm – still the most prolific ornithological publisher in Britain and beyond – has pushed the boat out with its family guides. The highly impressive new release *Cuckoos of the World* shared the successful formula of last year's *Cotingas and Manakins*, with an accomplished collection of both plates and photographs to augment its comprehensive text. These redesigned volumes, along with the new *Owls of the World: a Photographic Guide*, are a clear improvement on the previous generation of family treatments. At the other end of the spectrum, Helm's parent company Bloomsbury made waves with *Extinct Boids*, a riotous flight

of imagination with a serious message from Ralph Steadman and Ceri Levy.

Where Helm and company have been prolific, others have been less so. Collins, publisher of the world's best field guide in the form of the *Collins Bird Guide* (second edition), has been conspicuous by its virtual absence, with Dick Potts's *Partridges* in the ongoing *New Naturalist* series just keeping its profile visible. Similarly, for all its past achievements in the field and the occasional modern gem such as 2012's *Bird Sense* by

Tim Birkhead, Oxford University Press otherwise seems sadly in its twilight years as an ornithological force.

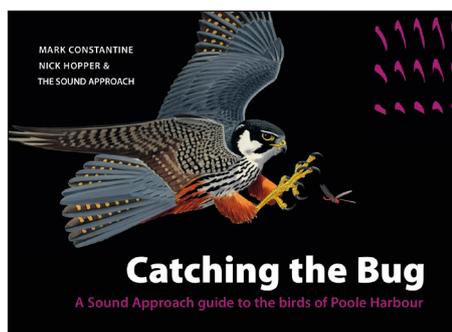
Perhaps Princeton University Press, now active here as well as North America following its partnership with the WildGuides imprint, will pick up the

mantle. Princeton's output in 2012 included the masterly *Petrels, Albatrosses, and Storm-Petrels of North America: a Photographic Guide* by Steve Howell, and the publisher is sure to establish itself more fully on birders' horizons with other works in future.

Also notably active during the year were Langford Press, with its prodigious output of art titles including Bruce Pearson's acclaimed *Troubled Waters*, The Sound Approach and its terrific latest project on Poole Harbour, *Catching the Bug* (see review on page 55), and New Holland, whose 2012 releases include *Fascinating Birds* by photographer Markus Varesvuo, winner of our Bird Book of the Year award last year with *Magic Moments*. Among the smaller publishers, the stand-out title is surely Mark Avery's highly rated *Fighting for Birds* from Pelagic Publishing.

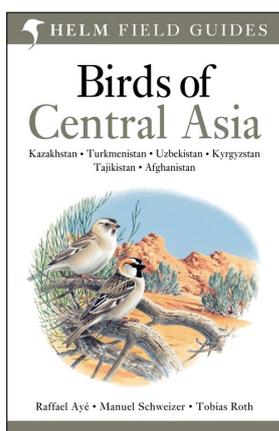
The winner

With contenders spanning a range of genres, styles and birds, picking a single title that stands out above the others is never easy. All impressed with their quality and depth of content, and offer the birder something



Catching the Bug

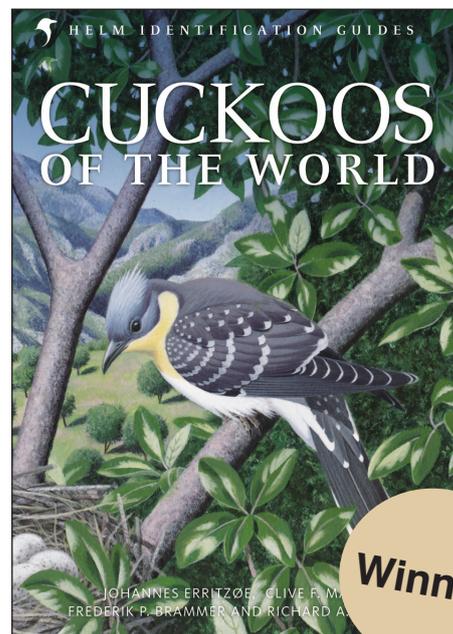
A Sound Approach guide to the birds of Poole Harbour



Birds of Central Asia

Kazakhstan • Turkmenistan • Uzbekistan • Kyrgyzstan
Tajikistan • Afghanistan

Raffael Ayé • Manuel Schweizer • Tobias Roth



Winner!

important and new. As a key reference fitting these criteria, however, there is no better candidate than Helm's *Cuckoos of the World*, a superb team effort by Johannes Erritzøe, Frederick P Brammer, Richard A Fuller and Clive F Mann. For birders in 'one cuckoo' Britain, the breadth of species in this family and their striking beauty may be something of an eye-opener, and the publisher's revamped monograph format – featuring photos as well as plates – lends itself to the subject perfectly. Congratulations on all involved with this benchmark guide.

Special mention must also be made of two other contenders. Helm excelled on the field guide front in 2012, with the much-anticipated *Birds of Central Asia* by Raffael Ayé, Manuel Schweizer and Tobias Roth especially noteworthy, but equally deserving of praise is The Sound Approach's *Catching the Bug*, a wholesale and dramatic reinvention of the local natural history book.

The verdict

Winner

Cuckoos of the World by Johannes Erritzøe, Frederick P Brammer, Richard A Fuller and Clive F Mann (Christopher Helm, London).

Highly commended

- ***Birds of Central Asia*** by Raffael Ayé, Manuel Schweizer and Tobias Roth (Christopher Helm, London).
- ***Catching the Bug*** by Mark Constantine, Nick Hopper and The Sound Approach (The Sound Approach, Poole).