

Book & Site Reviews

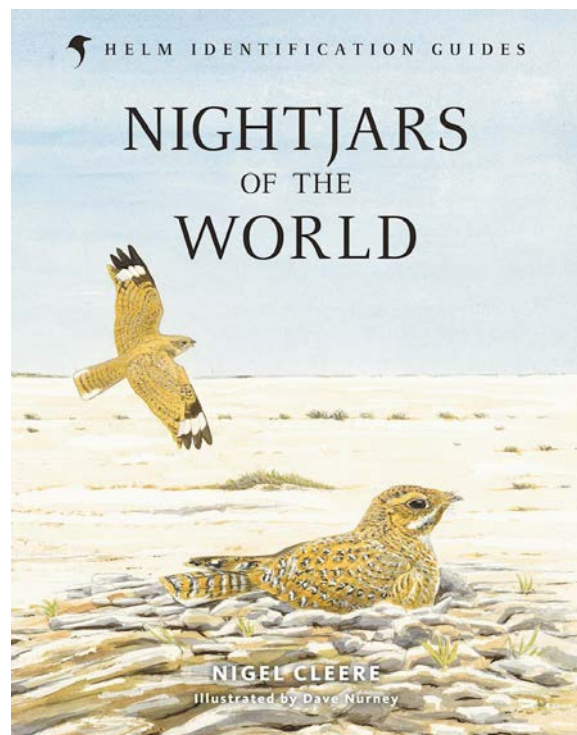
Nightjars of the World: A Guide to the Caprimulgidae by Nigel Cleere

Illustrated by Dave Nurney. Helm Field Guide, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2026

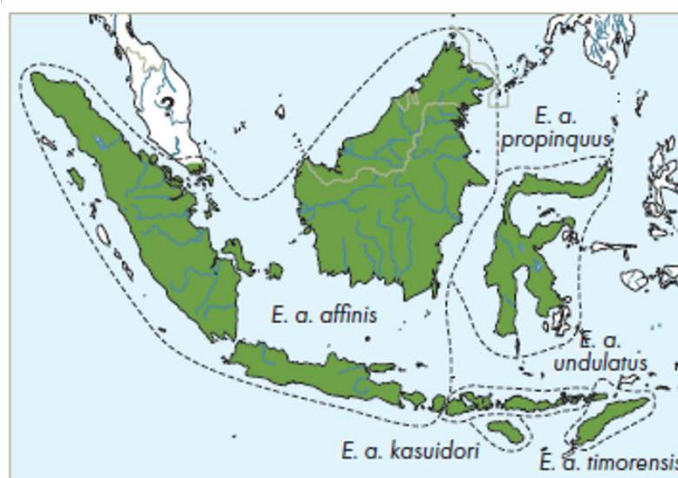
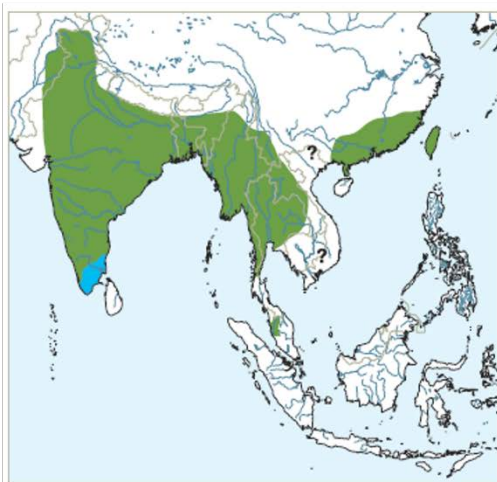
Amar-Singh HSS

It has been almost three decades since Nigel Cleere published 'Nightjars: A Guide to Nightjars and Related Nightbirds'. This publication, as Cleere says, was intended to be an updated second edition but the vast scope of work made him decide to concentrate exclusively on the family Caprimulgidae - nightjars, nighthawks, poorwills and pauraques - setting aside the frogmouths, potoos, owlet-nightjars and oilbird that his earlier work included. Although the scope may have narrowed taxonomically, the depth has expanded considerably

The most significant change from 1998 is taxonomic. The movement from reliance solely on anatomical and morphological characters, to the growth of molecular sequencing employed alongside morphological and vocal studies, has helped uncover previously unrecognised taxa. Where previous classifications recognised roughly 90 species across about 15 genera, Cleere now accepts 106 species of Caprimulgidae distributed among 31 genera, arranged in two subfamilies. The subfamily Eurostopodinae is carved out for the Australian and Pacific nightjars (7 species). The remainder sit in the greatly reorganised Caprimulginae (99 species). Cleere accepts that some taxa still remain undetected.

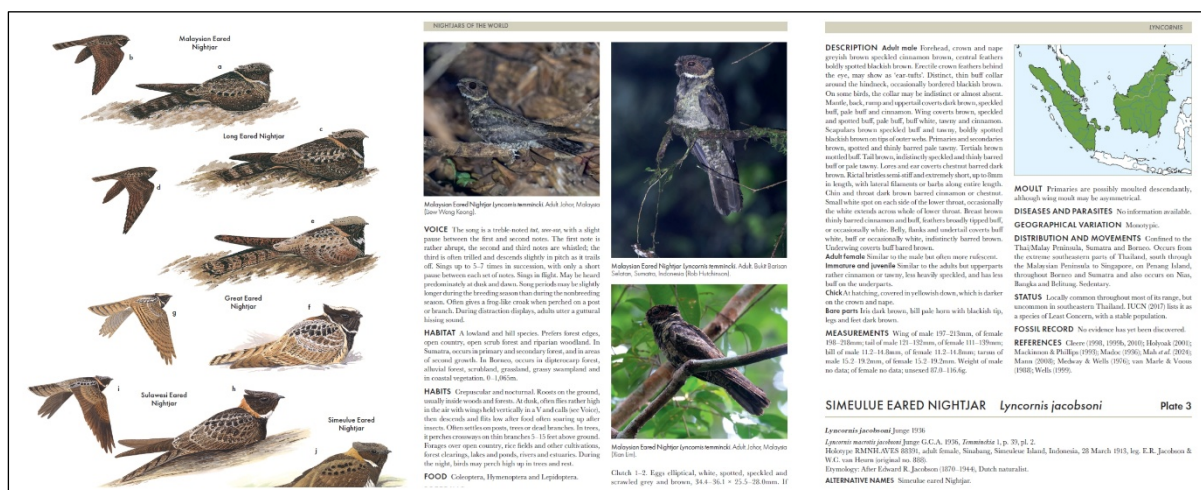


Many familiar names will look strange to readers of the previous edition or those using references like Clements Checklist of Birds of the World, eBird or Birds of the World. What was once an Indian Nightjar called *Caprimulgus asiaticus* is now *Rossornis asiaticus*. The Egyptian Nightjar *Caprimulgus aegyptius* is now *Eximiornis aegyptius*. Of more interest to local birdwatchers will be the split of the Savanna Nightjar *Caprimulgus affinis*. Cleere now uses Franklin's Nightjar *Eximiornis monticolus* (Franklin's Nightjar was an older name for Savanna Nightjar) for birds seen in Peninsular Malaysia and the rest of Asia, including the Indian subcontinent, and Savanna Nightjar *Eximiornis affinis* for birds in Singapore, Borneo and Indonesia (see image below). The split is from work by Sangster et al (2021; <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40657-021-00288-z>) and is based on discriminant function analysis avian vocalisation research. Both discriminant function analysis and principal component analysis are useful tools, but whether bioacoustics alone in any form, satisfies the scientific threshold required for formal species delimitation is uncertain. It would require an integrative framework combining vocal analysis with genetic, morphological, and ecological data to determine a new taxonomic designation.



Species distributions based on *Nightjars of the World: A Guide to the Caprimulgidae* by Nigel Cleere, Helm Field Guide, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2026

Any concerns about the taxonomic changes proposed by Cleere in no way diminish the excellent, comprehensive and in-depth work of a man, who has studied nightjars for more than 60 years. The book is a serious scientific review. The species accounts, which constitute the bulk of the volume, follow a rigorous and consistent structure: full synonymy with type specimens and their museum accession numbers, complete etymologies of both generic and specific names, taxonomy, identification (at rest and in flight), voice, habitat, habits, food, breeding, full plumage descriptions by age and sex, measurements, moult, diseases and parasites, geographical variation, distribution and movements, conservation status, fossil record, and references. Dave Nurney's excellent colour plates are supported by field photographs from a wide network of contributors.



Sample pages from the book, Helm Field Guide, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2026.



The introductory chapters on nightjar biology make for fascinating reading. Cleere covers physiology and behaviour, plumages and moult, foraging, food and breeding; drawing on decades of field and laboratory research. The function of rictal bristles, gular-flutter rates, retinal structure and breeding patterns are well described, as is the unusual short-term torpor physiology or longer term hibernation of a few species.

While casual birdwatchers would benefit from reading about selected species, this is clearly not a book aimed at the casual observer or for use in the field. It is a monographic treatment of an entire avian family and succeeds impressively.

Cleere's decades of commitment to the nightjar family has produced something that goes well beyond a revision. This is the most comprehensive and systematically thorough set of nightjar accounts published in a single volume.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to David Wells and James Eaton who offered some insightful comments on taxonomic changes.