

Book Reviews

The Macmillan Field Guide to Bird Identification. By *Allan Harris, Laurel Tucker, and Keith Vinincombe.* The Macmillan Press Ltd., London and Basingstoke, 1989. 224 pages, 94 colour plates, 24 black-and-white drawings. \$29.95 hardcover.

The *Macmillan Field Guide to Bird Identification* is aimed primarily at British observers, but will also be of considerable interest to Canadians. The guide concentrates on the latest identification techniques for "confusion species" such as loons, waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls, terns, and also includes many difficult passerines. The authors state that choosing the species to treat was a problem. In the end, "it was decided to include mainly those regularly occurring British and Irish species that present a problem for the 'average birdwatcher' and to include only those rarities that are frequently confused with something common." The guide is intended to be a companion or supplement to the standard field guides which by their concise nature cannot treat each species in detail. This guide also contains much valuable information on ageing, sexing, moults, subspecies, flight identification, calls, behaviour, habitat, hybrids, and unusual plumages. The authors draw heavily from articles originally published over the past 25 years in the monthly journal *British Birds*. For this reason alone, the book is worth having especially for those birders who do not have access to *British Birds* or other journals.

The guide is richly illustrated with 94 colour plates and 24 black-and-white drawings. Three hundred paintings depict 91 species with emphasis on juvenile and nonbreeding plumages, just the plumages which most standard field guides usually cover inadequately or omit. The illustrations are generally superb. Handwritten captions beside the illustrations highlight the main points mentioned in the text. This is an innovative extension of the "Peterson System" of arrows pointing to key field marks. I have only minor quibbles with a few of the illustrations. The Black-bellied Plover on page 68 should have hind toes. The bird in adult winter plumage on page 69 does appear to have them but they are not shown clearly nor are they mentioned in the text. I have found the presence of a hind toe on the Black-bellied is sometimes useful in separating them from "Goldens" particularly when the birds are back-lighted. Observers should be aware that the "Kumlien's" subspecies of the Iceland Gull often shows much more extensive and deeper gray markings on the wingtips than the adult on page 126. The eye colour of adults ranges from yellow to dark brown as well.

The text is very detailed and quite readable. For those wanting more information, many accounts end with a list of references, mainly from *British Birds*. North Americans using this guide at home should keep in mind that the species comparisons often reflect a British perspective. For example, the Ring-billed Gull is compared to the nominate European subspecies of the Mew Gull which differs considerably from the North American subspecies. The European subspecies occurs occasionally on our east coast so in this regard the treatment is relevant.

The authors hope that their guide will appeal to the beginner as well as the seasoned observer. However, I do not recommend this guide to new birders. Most beginners would likely find it confusing and frustrating to use. I recommend the guide to experienced observers visiting Britain, Ireland, or western Europe who require an in-depth supplement to their regular field guide. Since many of the species covered also occur in Canada, this guide will appeal to keen Canadian birders, especially those in the northeast. I highly recommend this guide.

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A Birdfinding Guide to the Toronto Region. *Clive E. Goodwin*, 153 pages, revised 1988. Published by the author. \$8.95 plus \$3.05 postage & handling. Paperback.

For a serious Ontario birdwatcher, the Toronto region is an excellent area to avoid whenever possible. The burgeoning megalopolis has eliminated much natural habitat, leaving only remnants of good birdwatching sites. Despite continuing habitat destruction, this guide, an update of the author's 1979 publication, succeeds in making Toronto birding more accessible to natives as well as to visitors.

The best way to determine the merits of a guide such as this is to work from the back to the front. At the back are two maps cross-referenced to the 105 described localities. Preceding this is a good

index, a list of rarities, a current date guide (often lacking in other similar efforts), a thorough species account, tips for the newcomer, recommended publications, location accounts, the local birding calendar and, at the beginning, a comprehensive introduction. Clearly the many different chapter subjects provide a variety of perspectives to the topic. The overall impression is of a very thorough guide to birdwatching in a very urban area.

This is a good book; it has a lot of useful information and every Toronto birder must have a copy if they haven't already. Having said that, I do have some suggestions for

the next revision, which will obviously be necessary in another few years.

There seems to be an emphasis on location at the expense of birdwatching. Directions both by car and public transit along with parking instructions are provided for what seems like every park, conservation area, and ravine in the whole area. However for a visitor to Toronto with limited time there is not a lot of specific information on the best areas to find a variety of rather common species. Examples include resident warbler species, migrant shorebirds, Marsh Wren, Sora, and Virginia Rail. Only one location (Humber Arboretum) is specifically mentioned for Eastern Screech-Owl. Despite the vagaries of urbanization, I feel the species' accounts should have suggested specific locations for many of these birds.

One of the results of this democratic treatment of a multiplicity of areas has been a lack of emphasis on the few real birding hotspots. For example, Cranberry Marsh, admittedly more famous now than when this revision was drafted, is given only one paragraph. The Leslie Street Spit (Tommy Thompson Park) fares better at two pages, but is so important that it almost merits a separate chapter. Perhaps a complete list of the many bird species best seen there should have been included in this section.

A clue to the author's feelings about unusual (rare) birds may be suggested in his prefatory remarks to the species rare in the Toronto region. Here he states that "Records Committees delight in retroactive tinkering with records of this kind." Surely not all Records Committees? Notwithstanding the author's preferences, many readers would be interested in knowing where the three occurrences of California Gull took place or whether the many records of Western/Clark's Grebe or Northern Gannet (10 each) had any commonality. Rather than segregating the 62 species with 10 or fewer records, they should have been included in the species accounts with a one- or two-sentence comment. Quite a number of these "rare" species are being seen with increasing regularity (e.g., American White Pelican, Great Cormorant, Sandhill Crane, Yellow-throated Warbler) and many birdwatchers are particularly interested in the changing status of these birds.

Along with *A Bird Finding Guide to Ontario* by the same author, this book occupies a place of honour in my auto glove compartment. Nestled in with the warranty manual and various road maps it is there as a critical reference available at a moment's notice to provide directions anywhere in the Toronto Region.

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Tracks in the Sky: Wildlife and Wetlands of the Pacific Flyway. 1987. by Tupper Ansel Blake and Peter Steinhart. Chronicle Books, San Francisco, California. (Canadian distributor, Raincoast Books, Vancouver, B.C.) 166 pp. + x. CN\$50.00.

"Few humans are aware of the existence of the Pacific flyway", writes Peter Steinhart. "Few of us know where the flyway becomes actual — where those spectacular concentrations of birds drop down through the clouds, touch the earth, and mingle with less mobile creatures." This lush book aims to convey, in photographs and words, a sense of the entire span of the western continental flyway, a great chain of wetlands along which flows a great river of waterfowl and shorebirds, from the Beaufort Sea down to Costa Rica.

It was a fine idea to produce a book about an entire flyway. For one thing, it stretches the imagination of (non-migratory) human readers. For another, flyway needs to be understood as a whole in order for its birds to be protected. The book carries a strong conservation message, underlined by its sponsorship from the Audubon Society. It is aimed at a broad audience; it does not, for instance, take sides on the question of hunting, reserving its harsh words for land developers and such bureaucratic foes as California's Central Bureau of Reclamation.

The core of the book is a stunning photographic essay by Tupper Ansel Blake. There are 130

full-page photographs, the result of five years' work. Arranged through the book in approximate sequence going north to south, they show sweeping landscapes, flocks of waterfowl and shorebirds, and intimate glimpses of wildlife. The large, wide-picture format used throughout the book gives it a cinematic quality.

Blake's landscapes, from tundra pools to desert, are particularly striking, dramatically lit, and rich with the abstract design of wild nature. There are some splendid wildlife portraits, for example those of a Western Sandpiper stretching a wing, and a Bald Eagle at a Canada Goose kill. Other photographs speak subtly of an animal's link with its environment: a distant wolf emerging from an autumn forest; a silhouetted Snail Kite, intently hunting over marshland; a wary Canvasback beautifully posed by a clump of bulrushes (shades of Robert Bateman!). In other shots, Snow Geese thicken the sky over a California lake, or come in to land, wings spilling wind, feet braking, so close overhead that I began to feel that I was reading some kind of soft-porn publication for hunters!

Some of the close-ups are marred by out-of-focus vegetation, or by poor composition; this might

be due in part to the book's wide "movie format", which would make it harder to crop photographs. Overall, though, Blake has done an excellent job in bringing home the spirit of the wild wetlands.

In comparison to the gorgeous photos, the text loses out; the book's designers have crammed it into three-column-widths of small type, always opposite a full-page photograph. In his seven chapters, author Peter Steinhart sketches the geography of the flyway, and discusses the value of wetlands, our cultural attitudes toward them, and the precarious state of the flyway today as human pressures grow ever more intense. The style moves between reportage, with facts and interviews, and a more personal view, with lyrical eye-witness descriptions and musings.

The description of places on the flyway's route is disappointingly brief. More maps and diagrams would have helped to explain its course. Only one partial map of the flyway is included, and the book's designers have relegated this to the endpapers. The other key chapter (awkwardly titled "How to Strangle a Flyway") is a dismal catalogue of today's grave threats to the flyway. Although there has been severe habitat loss throughout the midsection between southern Alberta and Mexico, the worst crisis is in California, winter home of 60 per cent of the flyway's waterfowl and 20 per cent of the continent's. Here, intensive farming and a

centralized irrigation system are cramming birds into too few nature reserves, supplied with inadequate and polluted water supplies. Very powerful economic and political forces threaten the wetlands; there is a great and urgent challenge for environmentalists.

I found that the pictures and text did not work well together. The sequence of the pictures takes no regard for the text, or vice versa. The text's grim statistics of wetland drainage and pollution find no echo in the photographer's world, where nature is pristine and there seem to be no other humans but Blake and his pilot. The pictures soar; the text gets stuck in the mud.

As a picture book, *Tracks in the Sky* is outstanding. If you have a bare coffee table somewhere, this is just what you need (it actually looks like an expensive box of chocolates, with its slick design and wide red-and-gold-bordered cover). As a source of information on Pacific flyway birds, it is of limited value. However, I think it should be judged by how effectively it promotes conservation. People can be persuaded by arguments, but they will not feel any commitment to a cause unless it touches them emotionally. Tupper Blake's wide-screen photographic travelogue takes each reader on a memorable trip, and shows them, far better than words can, why they should care.

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