Notes

Early Spring Date for Red-necked Phalarope

On 12 April 1986 at 1500h the author and Linda Guzman discovered a Red-necked Phalarope (*Phalaropus lobatus*) in basic plumage at the Comber Sewage ponds, Essex Co. What was undoubtedly the same bird was independently discovered and identified by Michael J. Oldham two hours later. The sighting of this individual is significant in that it represents the earliest spring record for Ontario by 24 days.

The phalarope was extremely tame, allowing approaches within 5m to note salient features. The swimming behaviour, general whitish colouration and smaller size than nearby Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*) immediately identified it as a phalarope. Further observation noted the following: underparts a clean white except for a hint of grey on the sides of the breast; back, wings, and rear of neck generally black with two bold rows of white-edged back feathers; head white except for two black areas, one a patch through the eye and the other a continuation of the black on the back of the neck ending on the crown above the eye; bill very slender, black, length about equal to head size; call note a distinct soft "pik". Bill shape and colour, darker upperparts and call note were characters that clearly separated this from the other two phalarope species.

James *et al.* (1976) list the earliest spring occurrence for this species in Ontario as 20 May. A search of recent issues of *American Birds* detected a few Ontario records prior to 20 May, the earliest being 7–9 May 1985 at Long Point Provincial Park, Regional Municipality of Haldimand-Norfolk (Weir 1985). The Long Point record appears to be the previous earliest for Ontario.

Outside Ontario within the Great Lakes basin, no April records could be located. However, in coastal New York state the species appears regularly in late March and early April and concentrations of several hundred are not uncommon in late April (Bull 1974).

The origin of this individual is intriguing. No particularly unusual influx of early migrants occurred simultaneous to the record and weather patterns seemed rather normal. The individual was notably tame, fed very actively, and seemed somewhat scruffy (both parties emphasized this), all factor which suggest a recent extended flight. The origin that comes to mind immediately is that it was an early coastal departure.

I will hypothesize one other possible origin just for fun. This species winters almost exclusively on the Pacific, Atlantic, and Indian Oceans (Harrison 1986). However, Bond (1985) lists four records for the West Indies, including one as late as 21 January. It is possible that this individual could have overwintered in the West Indies and headed northwards until it reached the Gulf Coast. In the absence of other individuals to stage with along the coast, the urge to migrate may have carried it inland, thereby accelerating its arrival in Ontario.

Regardless of origin, this observation provided a notable early record and some surprising excitement for two lucky parties.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Michael J. Oldham for providing his field notes and valuable comments.

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An Unusual Barn Swallow Nest in Elgin County

In June of 1986, Harry and Shirley Foster drew my attention to a rather unusual Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) nest on their farm located on the Golf Club Road, Southwold Township, near St. Thomas, Elgin Co.

The nest was located in a small barn used for the storage of garden tractors, feed, and tools. When the two front sliding doors of the barn were closed, the swallows gained access through open windows situated on the southeast side of the building. Several other pairs of Barn Swallows also used the shed for nesting purposes.

What made this nest so unique was its placement on a 3/16" wire which was strung from above the front doors near the peak of the barn roof and extended approximately 4m towards the rear of the barn where it again was fastened near the peak of the roof. The distance from the nest to the barn floor was about 3.65m.

The mud structure was anchored to the wire in such a manner so as to remain completely stationary. The centre of gravity thus produced ensured that the contents of the nest would remain in place. The nest was situated

about halfway between each end of the wire, which caused the front rim of the bowl to be parallel to the floor.

The form of the nest was quite different from those built on platforms such as barn beams. The overall shape can be likened to a large thimble with a V-shaped wedge being removed from one side about a third of the way up, creating the actual nest cup (Fig. 1).

The circular top, 9cm in diameter, was completely open and a 3.5cm hole on either side of the nest just below the wire provided a "window" from which a nestling was observed to beg for food (Fig. 2); however, during the day-long photographic session, none was fed at that opening (nor through the top of the nest) by either adult.

All four nestlings fledged successfully. The Fosters reported to me the following spring that during the winter months the nest was accidentally hit by a ladder and was substantially damaged. Watch was kept but no pair attempted to repair the remaining portion of the structure and no attempt was made to begin a new nest on the suspended wire.

Figure 1: Barn Swallow nest suspended from wire inside barn, near St. Thomas, Elgin Co., June 1986. Photo by *William J. Rayner.*

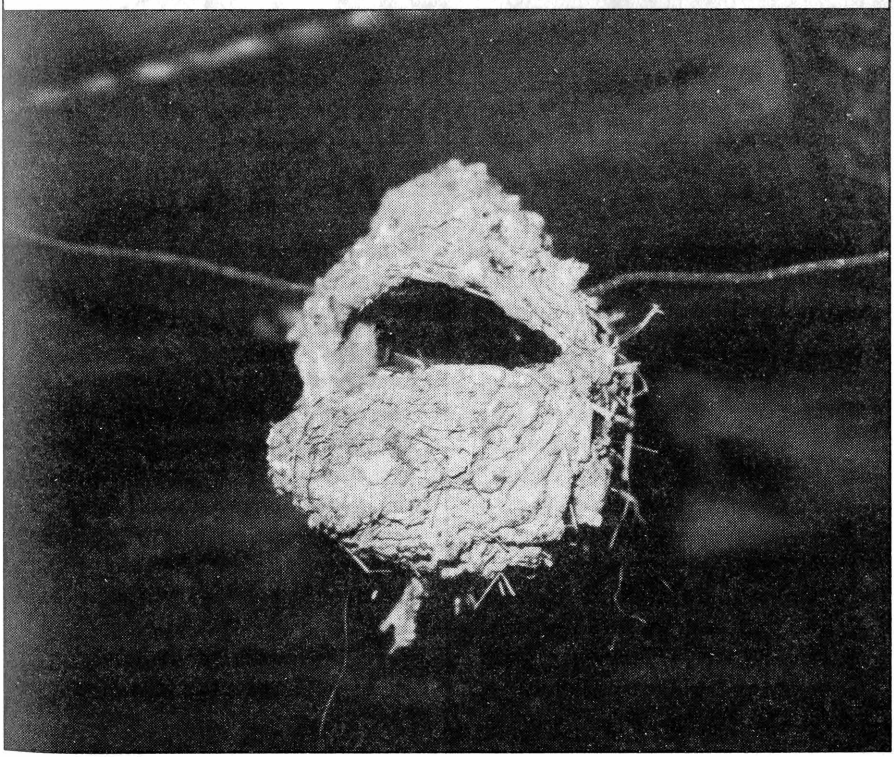
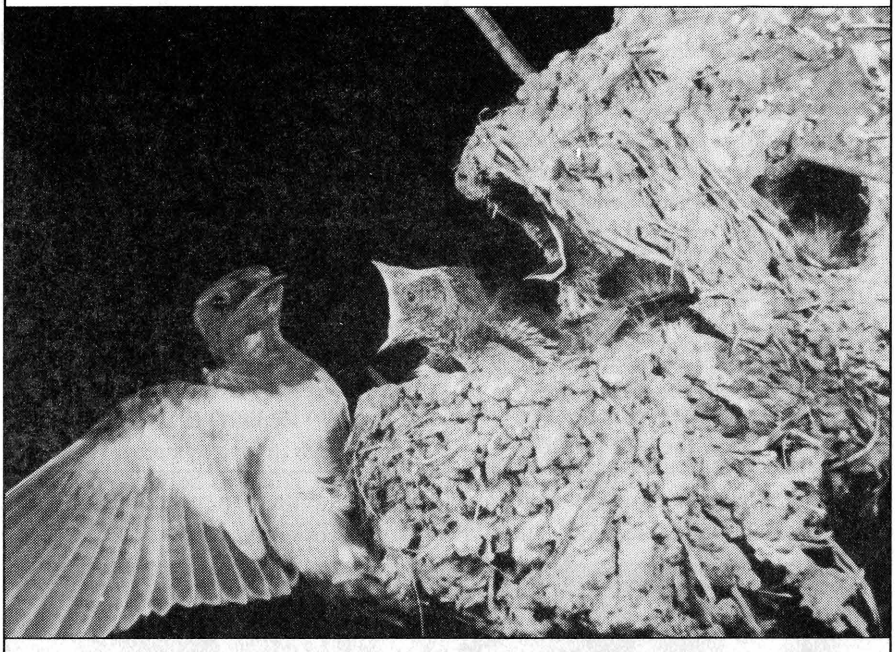


Figure 2: Barn Swallow nestlings begging for food, near St. Thomas, Elgin Co., June 1986. Photo by *William J. Rayner.*



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Book Reviews

National Geographic Society Field Guide to the Birds of North America. 1987. *Shirley L. Scott* (editor). National Geographic Society, Washington, D. C. 464pp. Available from ABA Sales @ US$17.95 members price, paperbound.

When the *National Geographic Society Field Guide to the Birds of North America* (NGS) burst upon the scene in 1983 it was quickly hailed as the crème de la crème of North American guides and was immediately adopted by serious birders. Now, as seems to be the trend, barely four years later we have a revised Second Edition. The first was reviewed by Don Fraser (*Ontario Birds* 2:48–51) and Guy McCaskie (*Birding* 16:25–32). This review will concentrate on changes from the first edition, with an emphasis on the meticulous criticisms of those reviewers, in an attempt to help you answer the question: "Should I buy the second edition so soon after the first?"

At first glance there are few changes. The number (464) and

sequence of pages remains identical and virtually all the plates are the same at a glance. Indeed, many are unchanged (if it ain't broke don't fix it) but careful examination of both text and plates discloses numerous refinements and improvements; the revision was a careful job of work — not a slapdash effort to get a new edition on the booksellers' shelves.

To the status terminology has been added the term "accidental". The writers avoided this term first time around. This can be done in a local study where the exact number of records can be listed, but in the first edition, the all-purpose "rare" often resulted in a misleading likelihood of occurrence. Now, "accidental" is used to describe the extreme rarity of many species at certain locations. Actually, the term "rare" is never clearly explained, but the reader will quickly infer that it means more frequently occurring than "casual", which is defined as less than annual.

A few species and forms which have begun to occur in the guide area since the first edition have been added to the plates. These are Green Parakeet, "Eurasian" Barn Swallow, Eurasian Jackdaw, Red-breasted Flycatcher, and Golden-crowned Warbler.

Much more significantly, many plates have had major improvements. These are sometimes subtle but then this is the nature of this sophisticated guide. The loons (p. 19) look considerably better in both plumage and form, although they are still not as good as those painted by Killian Mullarney (*British Birds* 79:366). Buller's Shearwater (p. 31) has a much lighter grey mantle, leading correctly to depiction of the M dorsal pattern. Now the western cormorants (p. 47) are not so green. The heron colours (p. 51) are toned down and the Little Blue Heron immatures now have correct grey bill bases and lores. The excellent dowitcher plate (p. 123) is even better. The primaries of the Long-billed Dowitchers are laid more naturally on the tails without losing the depiction of broader dark tail bands and *hendersoni* (our race) of Short-billed Dowitcher now, correctly, has a bill as long as some of the Long-billed Dowitchers illustrated. Both immature and adult Northern Harriers (p. 189) are now the correct colours. The cuckoos and anis (p. 235) have been totally redrawn and now have the appearance of real, rough-plumaged birds. On page 279 the Western Kingbird is lighter and Cassin's has a whiter throat to depict a diagnostic difference between these congeners. The bizarre eye-rings and far too intense colours of some small flycatchers (p. 293) have been appropriately modified. The Connecticut Warbler's embarrassingly huge foot is covered by a (fig?) leaf.

Not all errors have been corrected. The female Cinnamon Teal (p. 75) still has its bill immersed in water, the juvenile Pectoral Sandpiper (p. 134) still lacks yellow scapular stripes, the flying accip-

iters (p. 191) still have shrunken heads, some empidonaces (p. 291) still have curious elongate shapes, the swallows have had major revisions but some are still too broad-winged, and the *Catharus* thrushes still need a visit to a fat farm.

Several labelling errors on the plates have been corrected. The Yellow-footed Gull (p. 157) is now a first summer and the Plain-capped Hummingbird (p. 257) is now a Starthroat. However, the better-drawn cuckoos (p. 237) have the adult Black-billed labelled as a juvenile.

If anything, the text has had even more significant and extensive revisions to improve syntax, remove repetition and redundancy, and add specific new knowledge of identification subtleties. Here is only a sampling of the excellent additions. Clark's Grebe has a more extensive wingstripe than Western; Great Cormorant has a thicker neck and larger head that Double-crested; look for the pale pink facial skin and reddish eye on White-faced Ibis; note the fine dark speckling on and below the breast of many Short-billed Dowitchers in winter to help distinguish them from Long-billed; and the centre of the breast of some winter Western Sandpipers is faintly streaked, which Semipalmated Sandpiper never has. A good cautionary note for those who use the Peterson guide for hawks: the Broad-winged Hawk may have a pale area at the base of the primaries but it lacks the distinct pale crescents of the Red-shouldered Hawk. The short wings of Bell's Vireo make the tail look long and the dark bars on the central tail feathers of Cassin's Sparrow should be looked for.

Other information on status has been updated or changed. The Cattle Egret spread to South America (it was introduced according to the first edition); the Carribbean Coot is not only perhaps a subspecies but considered by some authors to be a "colour phase" of American Coot; Piping Plover is declining and press time information on California Condor is provided.

A nice new feature is that species mentioned in the text but neither illustrated nor given a separate species heading are boldfaced (e.g., Bermuda Petrel, Townsend's Shearwater, and Variegated Flycatcher).

Not much could be done with the tiny range maps except to provide a small magnifying glass (try it — it works!), although some maps have been modified in response to criticisms. For instance, Bobolink is now shown as a migrant through Louisiana. Given the abundance of other bird distribution information available, I suspect few birders use these maps seriously.

Well then, should you come up with the US$17.95 to get the second edition? Certainly the best North American bird identification guide for the serious birder is now even better. If you're planning a trip elsewhere in North American where you are less familiar with the birds,

possibly yes. If you can afford the most up-to-date and best equipment and aids then you'll no doubt want the second edition. Or if you're the type who studies and memorizes your guide then you'd better have the best information. Come to think of it, who's left?

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Guía para la identificación de las aves de Argentina y Uruguay [Guide for the Identification of the Birds of Argentina and Uruguay]. *T. Narosky* and *D. Yzurieta.* Vásquez Mazzini Editores, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Available from Victor Emanuel Tours, Box 33008, Austin, Texas, 78764.

South America has the richest avifauna of any continent, but, to the intense frustration of visiting birdwatchers, was until recently singularly ill-served by workable birdbooks. This woeful gap in the ornithological literature is, piece by piece, being remedied, but most of the important recent publications have dealt with the northern part of the continent — Venezuela, Colombia, Suriname; the temperate parts of South America which, while not as diverse as the tropical areas, are enormously interesting but still largely unserved.

Argentina is the eighth largest country in the world, but prior to the publication of the present work was treated only in one very inferior guide (a book of truly spectacular dreadfulness, published in 1959). Thus any serious book on the birds of southern South America is an important work. The geographic area covered by this guide is Uruguay, Argentina, and the Falkland Islands and Dependencies (which the authors, in a fit of inaccurate if entirely predictable patriotism, treat as a province of Argentina). The book is also highly relevant to Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia, and much of southern Brazil.

The layout of the guide follows a familiar pattern. After some brief pages of introduction and explanation, there is a useful set of thumbnail sketches of the 82 families found in Argentina and Uruguay. The book then launches into the species accounts.

Broadly speaking, there are two possible formats which can be used in a field guide. The side-by-side approach, as exemplified by the new Peterson guide, treats a species entirely within one double page, with the picture adjacent to the written account. Or, one can put all the pictures in a set of pages, and the descriptions and other data elsewhere, as Peterson originally did in his earlier guides. Both approaches have their advantages and disadvantages.

The major disadvantage of the "side-by-side" approach is that it severely limits the space available for text. The present guide uses this approach, and it is instructive

to compare the amount of information given about each species to that found in, for example, Hilty and Brown's new Colombian guide (see *Ontario Birds* 5:79–80), which uses the other format. Hilty and Brown deal with 1,700 species in 840 pages, while the present guide takes 340 pages for just under a thousand species. However, even allowing for the inherent verbosity of the Spanish language, Hilty and Brown manage to devote about four times as much text to their species accounts as does the present work.

Consequently the present work is much less informative than it could be. Nests and eggs, for example, are totally ignored. Even within the restricting format chosen, space is not used very efficiently, and there is a lot of blank page.

What makes or breaks a modern field guide is the quality of the illustrations, their accuracy, and their completeness. It has to be said that the artwork in this guide is by today's standards rather indifferent. Many of the species appear unnatural and crude in form, and the colouring is frequently inaccurate.

In some cases — in my copy the trogon page — this is exacerbated by poor quality printing. There is one page of illustrations of hypothetical species — identified for some reason only by scientific name, without a Spanish or English equivalent — which contains a truly remarkable sky-blue prion and a purple and pink ani.

A trivial but rather annoying feature of the illustrations is that similar species are often drawn in different attitudes; artistically more satisfying, doubtless, but making it difficult to compare plumage features critically — see, for example, the various red-breasted meadowlarks.

The descriptions are generally workmanlike and useful, but in many cases could with advantage be expanded. To take an example familiar to Canadian birders, the description of Baird's versus Semipalmated Sandpiper concentrates entirely on plumage differences, and makes no mention of the distinctive long-winged shape of the former; a distinction which is also concealed in the illustrations. The accounts of the skuas — which are treated as two species, Great and South Polar — do not deal with the problems of phases, despite the existence of several recent critical publications which go a long way to solving the identification problems of this group.

In summary, Narosky and Yzurieta's guide is not an outstanding book. It may not even be a very good one. But it is nevertheless still a useful and usable work, which will be an essential piece of equipment for any bird-watcher who ventures into southern South America.

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