

opment, which could cause considerable future disturbance to the crow roost.

Acknowledgements

We thank Dan Kozlovic and Nini Tun for assistance in counting the crows.

Literature Cited

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Book Reviews

The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding, Vol. 1: Loons to Sandpipers, Vol. 2: Gulls to Dippers, Vol. 3: Old World Warblers to Sparrows. 1983. *John Farrand* (editor), Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1244 pp., \$18.50 each, paperbound.

National Geographic Society Field Guide to the Birds of North America. 1983. *Shirley L. Scott* (editor). Kingsport Press: Tennessee, 464 pp., \$20.00 paperbound. (In Ontario available only from "Friends of Point Pelee", c/o Point Pelee National Park, R.R. #1, Leamington, Ontario N8H 3V4.)

If one were to ask a typical birder for advice concerning the purchase of a North American field guide, chances are that the reply would be either "*Peterson's*" or "*The Golden Guide*". Most, in fact, would probably recommend obtaining both. The past year, however, has seen the emergence of no less than three "new" field guides, all of which purport to provide the most thorough and up-to-date treatment of North

American birds. The choice is no longer that straightforward; suddenly birders are faced with a new and perplexing dilemma. Do these new guides truly live up to their claims? Which one is the best suited to my level of expertise? Do they represent an improvement over what is currently available? Given the high price of books, which one provides the best value for the money?

The three-volume *Audubon*

Society Master Guide to Birding, (hereafter *ASMG*) is largely a photographic guide. Unlike its two predecessors, *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds (Eastern Region)* and (*Western Region*), a concerted attempt has been made to include photographs of all resident North American species as well as many vagrants. Not only is the coverage of species vastly expanded, but birds are shown in a variety of different plumages. Where diagnostic, good quality photographs are unavailable, paintings have been substituted.

Species accounts are placed on the opposite page to the photograph. The authors of these accounts have been selected on the basis of particular expertise with the species in question, or the geographic region in which it typically occurs. This approach is based on the very valid assumption that no one individual is qualified to deal with the entire avifauna of continental North America.

Less emphasis is given to range maps than in the other guides reviewed here. Rather than employing several colours, differences between breeding and winter distributions are indicated by means of crosshatching. This system makes interpretation of the maps virtually impossible without close scrutiny.

Nomenclature and sequence of species are in strict accordance with the most recent classification adopted by the A.O.U. in 1983. The overall treatment is quite comprehensive. Pictures and accounts are provided for 835 species and a further 116

accidental and casual species are discussed in an appendix.

My greatest criticisms of the *ASMG* do not concern its content as much as its approach. The one major failing of any photographic guide which strives for comprehensiveness is that editors are forced to rely on what is available rather than what is ideally required. This constraint is perhaps best exemplified in the guide's treatment of waterbirds. For many species, particularly waterfowl and shorebirds, dorsal and ventral views of birds in flight are altogether lacking. An obvious attempt at standardizing format has resulted in too many frame filling close-ups which, while photographically pleasing, often ignore more salient field marks such as flight patterns and posture. After randomly thumbing through the guide one also gets the distinct impression that all North American birds, whether in flight or at rest, are incapable of facing right.

The title suggests that these guides are directed at the expert. Collectively they are intended "to satisfy the demands of advanced birders". Laying claim to the title "master guide" strikes me as a bit too pretentious and may lead some misguided birders to believe that merely having these books in one's possession will imply the attainment of a certain level of expertise. Their value as field guides is negated by overall size and weight; three volumes are simply too unwieldy to carry around. Personally, I feel that they are most useful as photographic reference books, to be consulted in

conjunction with other guides. While the expert birders may be dissuaded from purchasing the *ASMG* because of its inevitable deficiencies, the novice may be put off by its somewhat arrogant title. Unfortunately, anyone else is likely to balk at the price; at \$18.50 per volume, they can hardly be considered a bargain.

Inspecting the *National Geographic Society Field Guide to the Birds of North America* (hereafter *NGS*) for the first time was, for me, a revelation. This is a book that truly deserves consideration as the most advanced and sophisticated North American field guide produced to date. The acknowledgements read like a "who's who" of the northern hemisphere's top field birders; the collective knowledge of these individuals has obviously been drawn upon considerably by the project's chief consultants, Jon L. Dunn and Eirik A.T. Blom.

The *NGS* guide is comprised of 220 plates illustrating over 800 species. Thirteen well known bird artists were commissioned to produce what is undoubtedly the most comprehensive treatment of recognizable species, subspecies, plumages, hybrids, colour phases and intergrade populations contained in a single volume. The inclusion of many established exotics, pelagic wanderers and tropical and Eurasian vagrants never before pictured in a North American guide, reflects our recent fascination with such frontier areas as the Aleutian Islands.

Birds are arranged phylogenetically in conformance with the taxonomic sequence of the 1983

A.O.U. checklist. The only major departures from this sequence involve placing the Falconiformes after waterbirds and the inclusion of cranes with herons, ibises and storks. These changes were made to group families which share like habitats or display obvious morphological similarities, regardless of evolutionary relationship.

The value of any field guide is ultimately determined by the quality of its artwork. By employing a team of artists, more extensive coverage was achieved. However, inherent in this approach is the tendency for inconsistencies of style and accuracy to arise. The artistic renderings given to eastern rails (p. 99), accipiters (p. 191), Old World cuckoos (p. 235), swallows (p. 297-299) and chickadees (p. 311-313) are, to my mind, lacking in verisimilitude. The accipiters pictured in flight are particularly misshapen, with disproportionately small heads attached to bulbous bodies. Other plates suffer from an overly stylized approach, specifically phalaropes (p. 121), owls (p. 239-247) and large crested woodpeckers (p. 275). An injudicious use of space has occasionally resulted in situations where birds appear lost in a sea of white.

In general, however, the illustrations are highly informative and refreshingly lifelike. Typically, no more than four species are pictured on each plate. An entire page is devoted to pairs of species for which identification has traditionally been problematic. These include Short and Long-billed Dowitchers, Ring-billed and

Mew Gulls, Herring and California Gulls and Great and South Polar Skuas.

The range maps have been compiled on the basis of contemporary information and through the use of three colours, are considerably easier to interpret than those in the *ASMG*. The inclusion of provincial and state boundaries is a unique feature which substantially increases the maps' applicability at a regional level. One notable error of omission is that the breeding distribution given for Little Gull fails to identify any Ontario localities. Given that the first documented North American nesting of this species occurred in Oshawa's Second Marsh, it seems peculiar that such an oversight was ever made.

Species accounts are primarily concerned with descriptions of the birds. Upgrading our knowledge of field identification is obviously the first priority of this guide; less emphasis is given to ecological and behavioural aspects of the birds' life histories.

Despite the many advantages of this guide, there are, I believe, two flaws which bear some mention. An eastern birder will soon recognize that a distinct California bias pervades large sections. This is not surprising in light of Jon Dunn's vast experience with the bird life of the west coast. However, there are several examples where the subspecies typically found in the eastern

portion of the continent are neither illustrated nor mentioned. Of the six subspecies of Horned Lark pictured, only two, nominate *alpestris* and *enthymia*, are referable to Ontario races. By contrast, *hoyti*, the Arctic breeder which winters in small numbers in the southern part of the province, and *praticola*, the common breeding subspecies, are ignored. To a lesser extent this western bias is also reflected in the accounts for Gray Jay, Song Sparrow and Savannah Sparrow.

A less serious flaw also involves the guide's constant preoccupation with subspecific variation. For the novice birder, such attempts at comprehensiveness, while well intentioned, may give rise to confusion. Exposing a neophyte to too much information could conceivably compound what are already complex problems in identification.

On balance, however, this volume is worthy of the endorsement of all serious birders, whether beginner or expert. I feel quite certain that it will soon be regarded as the "bible" among field guides and the one against which all others will inevitably be judged. Like "*Peterson's*" and "*The Golden Guide*", the *NGS* guide is destined to spawn a new and enlightened generation of field ornithologists.

(Ed. Note. The recently released 2nd Edition of the *Golden Guide* will be reviewed in the next issue of *Ontario Birds*).