

Book Reviews

The ROM Field Guide to Birds of Ontario. 2001. By *Janice M. Hughes*. McClelland and Stewart Ltd., Toronto. Softcover, 416 pages. \$26.99. (ISBN 0-7710-7650-9).

The Hughes bird guide is the first in a series which The Royal Ontario Museum has decided to produce to cover our wildlife. In promotional items, it is referred to as the definitive guide to Ontario's birds and written specifically for the Ontario birdwatcher. One has to question the wisdom of producing a field guide when there are several excellent continental and eastern North American guides. In fact, this guide just does not stand up to any kind of scrutiny and pales when compared to, for example, the National Geographic Guide, The Sibley Guide and the Stokes Guide, to name but three. Of course, as it deals with just Ontario, the status and distribution information should be of great utility to Ontario birders. This certainly is true, in part, but the omissions and errors in these sections severely detract from what should be the greatest strengths of the book. So let's have a closer look.

An inviting introductory page discusses the diversity of Ontario bird life, the joy we all derive from experiencing birds, and a plea for conservation and vigilance on our part to preserve our treasures.

A section on bird identification has the usual headings and instructions such as size, shape, plumage and behaviour. The author comments that when difficult species groups such as *Empidonax* flycatchers and fall *Dendroica* warblers are encountered, "it may be more rewarding to forgo the struggle and merely enjoy the experience". Such advice, which runs counter to modern field techniques, will hardly mollify experienced birders and hints that, claims to the contrary notwithstanding, this is a book more suited to beginners. Beginners beware – minefields lie ahead.

Sections entitled Birding by Habitat and by Season refer specifically to Ontario and would be useful to the inexperienced. The habitat descriptions are good and allow Hughes to emphasize her loss of habitat theme. There are, however, several inaccuracies. For example, readers now accustomed to seeing Sandhill Cranes in parts of southern Ontario in virtually every season will be surprised to learn that "adventurous birders often travel to the Hudson Bay Lowland Forest in search of the rare Sandhill Crane"!

The grouping unit for birds in this book is the order. While this is taxonomically appropriate, it is not in some instances helpful to birders who generally perceive and sort

birds by family. For example, the order Charadriiformes contains, as Hughes points out, six anatomically and behaviourally distinct families (shorebirds, gulls, and so on). So why not treat these separate families, as birders do automatically in their thought processes, which would aid immeasurably in finding a bird in the book and matching it to what one encounters? The orders are designated by different colours to direct the user more quickly to the appropriate section of the book. Again, when so many species are within a colour group it can still be difficult to find a bird quickly. Moreover, it would have been helpful if a colour legend on the inside cover indicated the order name and page range.

As most authors do, Hughes includes a list of labels which thumbnail the status of each species. In this case, there are nine categories ranging from abundant to accidental, plus vagrant and irruptive. Such designations are always difficult in application, but some of the definitions can be challenged. Occurring five to 20 times in the province in a given season hardly seems "very rare". It would be simpler to eliminate very rare and just have rare (five to 20) and extremely rare (occurring less than five times in the province in a given season). More troublesome is that the categories have not been correctly applied to many species, possibly because the author is not

familiar enough with the status of birds in Ontario. I'll return to this under the species accounts.

Hughes includes a list of books which provide further information on Ontario birds. Most notable for their absence, however, are Godfrey's *The Birds of Canada*, Peterson's *A Field Guide to the Birds* and Kaufman's *Lives of North American Birds*. On the other hand, a list of Internet sources on page 17 will help both beginning birders and the organizations whose web pages have been listed.

Obviously, the species accounts of this book are its essence. The format of one page per species is a very good one. It begins with a three or four line introduction to the species that is often the best part of the account. It is frequently informative and sometimes evocative. For example, workers have injected natural gas pipelines with odours attractive to Turkey Vultures and watched circling flocks to find leaks!

This is primarily a photographic guide to the birds of Ontario. As such, the photos must pass the test of accuracy and usability. Many of the photos are attractive and will aid beginners, cottagers and the like in identifying that unfamiliar bird. Others fail. All the photos must be correct, but there are several errors in the species depicted and several more errors in the labelling of age classes. There is no excuse for this. Proofreaders should have picked

up all of these errors. At best, experienced birders will take some amusement in finding the errors and at worst, those less experienced will be misled and will make mistakes if they use this book solely. Moreover, many photos are portraits, when a flight shot would be much more useful in identification. Or adults in breeding plumage are depicted, when it is immatures and winter plumages that are needed.

Incorrect photos are as follows: the female Common Eider is a King; the Franklin's Gull is a Bonaparte's; the flying Thayer's Gull looks much closer to the Kumlien's end of the continuum; and the Common Yellowthroat female is a female Orchard Oriole. The introduction states that, unless otherwise captioned, the photos depict the summer (breeding) male. Among those that are not alternate males or are otherwise mislabelled are the following: the Rough-legged Hawk is a juvenile female; the Willet is not a breeding plumaged bird; the Black-headed Gull is a breeding plumaged adult, not a summer immature; and Sanderling, Solitary, Western and Least Sandpipers are juveniles, not winter plumaged birds.

If this is to be a field guide, then many of the portraits are inappropriate. The photos of hawks, eagles and falcons are essentially portraits. Inexperienced birders would seldom if ever be able to identify Mississippi Kite, Northern Harrier,

the accipiters, the buteos and Merlin using these photos. Similarly, the vultures are photographed perched, the Parasitic Jaeger is sitting on a nest and the Chimney Swifts are photographed inside a roost! Only professional photographers encounter birds in these situations. Some species have two photos – one in breeding plumage and one of a bird in duller plumage (juvenile or winter). This should have been done for many other species, but wasn't.

Under the heading, Appearance, adult breeding males are first described followed by more obscure plumages. Similar species and the features used to distinguish them from the currently discussed bird are outlined. The format is that a detailed description of the breeding adult is followed by a shorter description of females, winter adults and immatures. Since in many cases the photographs show the salient features of the breeding adult, it would have been much more helpful to virtually eliminate this description and use the space for a more detailed explanation of how to distinguish the birds in their less obvious plumages. Instead of using 49 words to describe the breeding Common Loon, which is one of the most familiar species in the province, why not let the photo do that job and greatly expand on the twenty or so words used to describe winter and immature plumages.

It is the status description and the maps which ought to make this book most useful to Ontario birders. However, the status definitions in the front of the book are incorrectly applied in very many of the species accounts. Space precludes mentioning all such errors and omissions, so I will mention just a few examples that are incorrect by two categories of status. The status as given in the book will be followed by my assessment in brackets: Blue-winged Teal: rare winter resident (casual in winter); Long-tailed Duck: locally common winter resident (locally abundant winter resident); Swainson's Hawk: rare spring and fall migrant (extremely rare spring and fall migrant); Kirtland's Warbler: very rare spring and fall migrant - remember, the definition given is that it usually occurs only five to 20 times in a given season - (casual in spring and fall); Lark Bunting: rare visitor - remember that rare as defined in the book means present in very low density - (casual visitor). That Lark Bunting is present in very low density came as a surprise to this reviewer, who has seen but two in 47 years of birding in this province. In other cases, omission of information is misleading to the inexperienced. The reader would not know that Common Eider has ever occurred in southern Ontario, as it is not mentioned. No mention is made of the winter status of Northern Shoveler, Northern

Pintail, Ring-necked Duck and Harris's Sparrow, to name a few. You get the picture. To repeat, the problem stems from an unwieldy system, but also had the author checked the OBRC Annual Reports and seasonal accounts in the various journals, she would have obtained a truer picture of status.

The distribution maps are printed in five colours, which allows for a lot of information to be depicted. Generally, these are quite accurate and helpful, but with a little more care their accuracy and utility could have been improved. Several species of ducks could have been shown as wintering in the extreme south. The Northern Bobwhite as a wild native species occurs only on and adjacent to Walpole Island (birds elsewhere are releases from captive stock), whereas the map suggests it occurs throughout southwestern Ontario. The Black Vulture has occurred in the Bruce Peninsula and as far northeast as Ottawa. There are many more cases where more attention to detail and the available literature would have produced a better map.

An Accidentals section follows the species section. I'm unconvinced that the clinical descriptions of each would be of much help in identifying most of these birds. Most people would use one or more of the standard North American field guides for these species. My

suggestion would be to note the number of occurrences of each, and perhaps whether there is a spatial or temporal pattern involved. More seriously, at least the following species have occurred more than a few times in the province (again, the precise number of reports accepted by the OBRC is available in the Annual Reports) and are thus not accidental: Western Grebe, Great Cormorant, Tufted Duck, Swallow-tailed Kite, Purple Gallinule, Black-necked Stilt, Rufous Hummingbird, Fish Crow, Sage Thrasher and Spotted Towhee. All of the birds on this list are given the same weight. A few words in place of the description, giving the true status of Black-capped Petrel, Slender-billed Curlew, Siberian Rubythroat and Cave Swallow, to name just some, would be infinitely more appropriate in a book about Ontario birds.

In summary, the book lacks accuracy and focus. Birding is, to quote a line I've heard, "the most sporting of sciences and the most scientific of sports". The informa-

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Birds of Ontario. 2000. By *Andy Bezener*. Lone Pine Publishing, Edmonton, Alberta. Softcover, 376 pages. \$26.95. (ISBN 1-55105-236-9)

Here is yet another book called *Birds of Ontario*, published the year before the ROM guide. It is authored by Andy Bezener, who

tion presented could have been much more accurate and contained far fewer errors had the author consulted with experienced field birders (i.e., non-scientists) and used the OBRC Annual Reports and the other journals. With so many excellent field guides on the market, perhaps the ROM book should have focussed on the status of the birds in Ontario. It could have had at least two good photos per species and substituted more detailed Ontario status and distribution material for the descriptions. It could have been titled *An Illustrated Checklist of the Birds of Ontario*, and then the photographic portraits which are of little use for identification purposes would have been quite appropriate.

Birders being acquisitive by nature will probably have a copy of this book on their shelves. But apart from checking for errors in addition to those listed herein, I doubt they will use it. It is casual and beginning birders who will be misled by much of the information in this guide.

has written apparently similar books for other localities in North America. The title page also notes "contributions by Ross James", who reviewed the manuscript and distribution maps. I am not familiar with Bezener or his work, but it appears that he has considerable knowledge of birds and birding in Ontario.

The Introduction makes it clear that this book is intended for beginning and intermediate birders, and those who casually watch birds, perhaps at the backyard feeder or the cottage. It states that: "by focusing specifically on the bird life of Ontario, we hope to ease the beginner's difficulty" in coping with standard North American field guides which "can be daunting because they cover the entire continent and present an overwhelming number of species". So, how well does this book present information for its target audience? In my opinion, it succeeds fairly admirably, within its limitations.

The book begins with short, informative sections on: beginning to learn the birds, classification, birding equipment, birding by ear, watching bird behaviour, birding by habitat, calling birds closer, bird listing, birdwatching groups, bird conservation, bird feeding, and nest boxes. One hundred of Ontario's top birding sites, selected "to represent a broad range of bird communities and habitats, with an emphasis on accessibility" are listed, and their locations shown on a map of Ontario. There are short descriptions, including expected noteworthy birds, for 21 of these sites, which will be helpful to inexperienced birders. They appear to be accurate for the most part, although one error detected was the statement that Northern Saw-whet Owls are likely to be encountered in Algonquin Park during winter,

when in fact the species is very rarely observed then.

The remainder of the book is devoted to the species accounts, which consist of a colour illustration, text and Ontario range map for each bird, all on one page. A handy Reference Guide at the beginning of the book features a miniature version of each species painting, with a colour code grouping birds by type (e.g., waterfowl, birds of prey, grouse-like birds) and linked to the species accounts, plus a page number for each species. This feature will be particularly helpful for those unfamiliar with the latest taxonomic order.

Perhaps due to a typographical error, there is some confusion as to how the species featured in the accounts were chosen. The Introduction (page 31) states that "this book gives detailed accounts of the 318 species of birds that have nested or been confirmed nesting in Ontario at least 10 recorded times; these species can be expected on an annual basis". However, many of the accounts deal with species that do not breed in Ontario, and clearly state this in the Nesting section. Perhaps the criterion should have been stated as "have nested or been confirmed in Ontario at least 10 recorded times".

Each species account begins with a short overview about aspects such as behaviour, habitat, appearance, and origin of the name. These introductory remarks are usually

very interesting and well written. Then there is concise information under the headings of: ID, size, status, habitat, nesting, feeding, voice, similar species, and best sites. The colour illustrations by Gary Ross and Ted Nordhagen, although of uneven quality, are mostly quite good and certainly enhance the visual appearance of the book. The identification information and the illustrations would be inadequate for distinguishing many species of Ontario birds, without reference to a standard field guide as well, but the book was not intended to “stand alone” in this regard.

The Ontario range maps are a valuable feature of the book. They designate areas of summer/breed-

ing, year-round occupancy, occurrence during migration, and winter presence. Most appear to be accurate, providing current information not readily available elsewhere.

An Appendix provides brief notes and an illustration for each of 37 additional “occasional bird species” that occur less frequently in Ontario. A checklist of Ontario’s birds, a reference list, a glossary, an index of scientific names, and an index of common names complete the book.

I would recommend this book to those seeking an informative and entertaining introduction to the birds of Ontario. This volume is a handy, concise reference to basic information.

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OFO Annual General Meeting Point Pelee National Park 29 and 30 September 2001

There is still time to register for this great weekend of fall birding. Join experienced OFO birders Bob Curry, Karl Konze, Gavin and Ian Platt, Paul Pratt, Pete Read, Ron Tozer and Alan Wormington who will lead field trips with a focus on bird identification at Point Pelee and nearby hotspots. The Saturday evening banquet at the Leamington Dock Restaurant will feature a special presentation on **Hawk Migration and Accipiter Identification** by keynote speaker Allen Chartier, plus presentation of the OFO Distinguished Ornithologist Award to George Peck, and “Bird Migration Across the Gulf of Mexico” by Alan Wormington. For AGM information and registration form, please see the OFO website: www.interlog.com/~of0/AGM2001.htm