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When it rains, it pours! The new Peterson eastern field guide was published only three years ago, a much heralded and long-anticipated event. But the book played mainly to mixed reviews, and some were damning (see, for example, Jon Dunn's in The Auk, 98:641-644, July 1981). After reading Dunn's critique, I thought: "Anyone would have to be nuts to attempt a new field guide; there's too much to cover nowadays."

Yet, within the past couple of months, a truly new guide has appeared from an unusual source, the National Geographic Society (NGS). However, the Society's long tradition of fostering bird study goes back well over a generation to its support of Cornell University's Arthur A. Allen that culminated in the 1951 publication of his epochal Stalking Birds with Color Camera. The Society's Field Guide to Birds of North America is quite revolutionary. It has no single author (rather a stable of writers, researchers, consultants, and designers) and it features no single artist (rather thirteen who prepared the book's 212 color plates). From such a crew, I expected a hodge-podge but upon flipping through the volume's well-manicured pages, I was amazed by the uniform excellence of the illustrations and text. The lifelike drawings are crisply printed, their colors faithful, and plumage details abound. The depictions of scores of subspecies and geographical color variations should capture the attention of even the most jaded lister. Where else in one pocket volume can you find detailed treatments of: two forms of Common Eider, four of Clapper Rail, three of Short-billed Dowitcher, five of Horned Lark, six of Fox Sparrow, two of Hoary Redpoll?

I suspect most birders will soon carry only this guide afield. Shorebird aficionados will appreciate the illustrations of breeding, winter, and juvenile plumages for many species. And the "gullable" cannot help but be impressed by the depicted variety of species and plumages. It would have been nice, however, to see autumn warblers ganged on one spread. The NGS field guide also contains virtually every vagrant likely to be seen in North America - only such bizarre travelers as Western Reef Heron should send us scurrying elsewhere.

The text is as detailed and concise as the plates. Even birders who have memorized all previous guides will find new insights. Sure, I've noticed a few mistakes (mainly omissions), but they are few. Adjacent to the text are synoptic range maps, postage-stamp size and clearly inferior to those in the new Peterson. The lack of migratory date-lines (also like Peterson) could mislead the beginner.

This is a good place to express my one general negative reaction. So numerous are the pictures and so tightly written is the text that the beginning birder may well be turned off by the impossible task of learning it all. The introduction doesn't give enough suggestions as to how to cope with so much information. This guide synthesizes just about everything that has been learned.

NGS offers this paperbound field guide as a part of a package that includes a four-record set of bird songs, a hard-bound book on general ornithology, and a map of migration in the Americas. (These items are beyond the scope of this review, but the record set, in particular, deserves critical assessment.) For birders on a budget, the \$29.95 pricetag for the lot is dear, but the guide is available separately from several dealers.

The NGS package appeared a few months after the issuance of the "expanded, revised edition" of an old friend, Birds of North America by Chandler Robbins, et al. My 1966 edition, held together by rubber bands, has traveled more than 100,000 miles around North America; it has been my bible. But the bible has been desecrated! In modernizing its plates, while apparently attempting to keep the price low, corners were cut - far too many corners. The film for printing must have been replicated many times to allow species to be introduced (or deleted) according to today's logic. This cut-and-paste operation degraded Arthur Singer's originally excellent illustrations. The portraits in the new edition are often either fuzzy or harsh; some are grotesque (like the Great Black-backed Gull with the withered foot); and many are badly off color. A few plates manage to combine several faults! The text, however, has been nicely rewritten to include new information; clearly, this is the best part of the effort. The range maps have been properly revised - Robbins knows where the birds are. Nevertheless Eastern birders with the new Peterson will find its large-scale maps much more useful.

There is another aspect to bird watching that none of the modern guides addresses well - the lives of the birds themselves. The "big three" do not tell us much about what the birds eat, or describe their habitats, or talk about nesting, or consider their impact on people (and vice versa). In this respect the Audubon series by Richard H. Pough remains a classic. These books deserve a full update, and they would complement the newcomers. The "Audubon Society" walked a similar road with its 1977 photographic bird guides - the detailed text was quite good. Unfortunately, the overall concept was a tutorial disaster.

Are the new field guides better than the old ones? Certainly insofar as species coverage, identification tips, modern nomenclature, and range information are concerned. But this does not mean that the old guides are bad; many critical identifications, including Ross' Gull, have been made in

recent years from Don Eckelberry's forty-year-old drawings in Pough's guides.

This point was driven home to me on October 20. The bird had the gestalt of a Bobolink (late), and it was directly in line with the sun - I could see almost nothing. The only markings visible were some dark, triangular ticks on the shaded undertail coverts. No "modern" guide helped. Then I looked in Pough, and there was Eckelberry's beautiful drawing of a "fall" Bobolink. A couple of weeks later I received the NGS guide, and its picture of a breeding female also hinted at those streaks - the depicted fall and juvenile critters lacked them! Although some contradictions still need to be sorted out, my first plumage clue as to this bird's identity came from Pough's "ancient" guide. You can't have too many!

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Too late for review in this issue: The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding, John Farrand, Jr., ed., 3 volumes, Alfred Knopf, \$42 (discounts available), covers 835 species, including 116 accidentals, with names and phylogenetic sequence according to the new A.O.U. system. The text, written by 61 "master" birders, and the color illustrations, primarily photos but also artists' portraits, are on facing pages. At most, three species are covered in two pages and there are as many as six color pictures for some species depicting sexual, seasonal, and age differences. RIGHT HAND PAGES: each color picture has beside it a postage-stamp-sized, black and white reproduction. Superimposed on this small "plate key" are numbered red arrows referring to a numbered list of field marks below it, an inspired, useful, and beautiful format. LEFT HAND PAGES: each species write-up covers habitat, behavior, description, voice, similar species, range, and as many "personal secrets" for bird identification as the "key expert" could fit in. Small but clear range maps are printed in blue, and there are many small sketches to illustrate the species in flight or other details useful to the birdwatcher. There is a general description of each bird family and a list of all members of that family found in North America, with accidental species in light-phase type, a very useful feature. Other pluses are a superbly illustrated introduction that includes seven pages on how to find and identify birds, a very comprehensive index, a glossary, brief biographies of the writers, a section on birding equipment, and appendices on accidentals, reporting rarities, and rare bird alerts (with phone numbers!). This is a "classy" encyclopedic photographic field guide, a prodigious undertaking, meticulously planned, compulsively organized, and beautifully executed, obviously designed to be essential to the serious (and well-equipped) birder's portable library. With such a splendid product, it saddens this writer that Knopf has continued to use the misleading trademark, "The Audubon Society," but I guess that even with books, "Business is . . ."

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