

BOOK REVIEW

A Field Guide to Personal Computers for Bird Watchers and Other Naturalists by Edward M. Mair. 1985. Prentice-Hall, 208 pages, \$9.95.

Most avid birders are checklist addicts. It is not unusual to meet a birder who keeps a life list, a year list, a home town list, and a "my backyard" list. Others keep detailed field diaries that they hope will provide fresh insights into the habits and occurrences of their quarry. After a few years, keeping track of all this data can be an overwhelming task. But just imagine what could be done if these records were all in a computer. The birder asks the computer, "Where have I seen Snowy Owls in late February?" and the computer quickly gives him a detailed print-out of the requested information.

One of the more enthusiastic advocates of the personal computer in birding is Edward Mair, a Newburyport resident who organized the Newburyport Birder's Exchange to encourage the use of a personal computer as a birding tool. In this paperback book, Field Guide to Personal Computers, Mair provides an introduction to computer hardware and software with an eye to its potential for aiding the birder.

Anyone who is intimidated by the jargon of computing will appreciate Mair's excellent nontechnical explanations of the inner workings of computers. The book describes the most popular computer models and points out the features that are most important for typical birding applications. Mair recommends that a birding computer system have two disk drives, the CP/M or MSDOS operating systems, 64K of memory, and a dot matrix printer. Such a system would be difficult to assemble for less than \$1800, so obviously we are talking about a major step up from the familiar dogeared spiral notebook.

Many commercial software packages can be customized for birding applications. The same database program that a business uses to keep track of auto parts inventory can be used to keep track of bird sightings. Mair devotes a separate chapter to birding uses of the major types of computer software: word processing, database management, and spreadsheets.

The book has several weaknesses. Much space is wasted by mundane black-and-white photographs that have little relevance to the text (such as the one of a hummingbird with the caption, "Hummingbirds and personal computers have incredible powers"). Fortunately several of Julie Roberts' sensitive drawings are present to add visual charm to the pages.

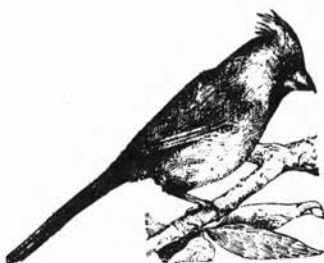
Despite the availability of actual birding data from Christmas Bird Counts and hawk watches, Mair uses "fictional" data in most of his examples. This, together with a lack of attention to real-world problems such as data entry, lends a disturbingly hypothetical flavor to several of the computer applications Mair discusses.

The chapter on computer graphics is uninformative. It deals mostly with bar charts (which are scarcely better than tabular print-out in analyzing data) and ignores scatter plots, a much more powerful graphical technique that can reveal data patterns not detectable in print-out.

Many birders hope that their records can somehow result in genuine insights into species abundances, migration behavior, and other ornithological topics. Unfortunately, Mair has little to say on these more "scientific" applications where data validation, normalization, and statistical analysis become key issues.

Despite these shortcomings, the book will be of considerable value to the birder purchasing a personal computer for the first time, especially if he is interested mainly in using commercially available software to keep species checklists. Buying a personal computer is a tricky business. It's easy to be sold expensive extras that look great in the showroom but are never really needed at home. On the other hand, buying a machine with inadequate capabilities is a recipe for frustration. Mair's advice can increase the birder's odds of becoming a happy PC owner.

JOHN ANDREWS, the reviewer, is chairman of BIRD OBSERVER's Field Studies Committee. He uses personal computers professionally in engineering applications as well as in the analysis of Field Studies' data.



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