

BOOK REVIEW

Shorebirds, An Identification Guide by Peter Hayman, John Marchant, and Tony Prater. 1986. Houghton Mifflin, 412 pages, 88 color plates, 215 maps, \$35.

The British have done it again! This long-awaited volume, nearly identical in format to the popular and widely acclaimed *Seabirds, An Identification Guide* by Peter Harrison, is another landmark in avian identification literature. The title understates the book's scope, however, for this is much more than an identification guide; it is, in fact, a condensed handbook with a wealth of information on all of the world's shorebirds. *Shorebirds* covers 214 species generally classified as shorebirds, including several poorly known and, in some cases, extinct species that have never previously been adequately illustrated.

Following a foreword by Roger Tory Peterson - the ornithological equivalent of the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval - are several introductory sections, foremost among which is "How to identify waders," a particularly enlightening primer and must reading for any serious shorebirder. Another section, "Conservation of wader habitats and species," also warrants widespread exposure among all concerned with this fascinating group of birds.

The showcase of the book are the 88 color plates by Peter Hayman, each depicting from one to four species, with a facing page containing brief descriptions of identification features for each plumage and small four-color distributional maps. Following the plates are 176 pages of species accounts, nine tables synopsising some of the more difficult identification problems, a short appendix, seven pages of bibliography, and an index. Each species has been assigned a number which is used throughout the book in cross-referencing the plates, plate captions, and the species accounts. In addition, letter suffixes following the numbers indicate the plumage (or race) illustrated in the plates.

Peter Hayman's artwork is superb, combining a sensitive artistry with technical precision, and far surpasses any shorebird illustrations in previous field guides. The artist went to great pains to insure accuracy in the shapes and proportions of the birds (as he describes in one of the introductory sections), and the results are virtually flawless. The colors are also generally very accurate, though perhaps a bit exaggerated in some cases and a few are noticeably off. The Piping Plovers in plate 39 have a sickly, ashen look rather than the bright, sandy coloration evident in life. The Wilson's Plovers at the top of the plate suffer from the same affliction. Nowhere among the various Least Sandpiper plumages on plate 78 do I find the dark, chocolate brown birds ("Hershey-pipers") characteristic of the worn adults that pass through New England in large numbers during July and early August. The breeding-plumaged Willet (146a in plate 59) described as the nominate eastern form appears much more similar in coloration and pattern to the paler, gray western

race (*inornatus*) than to the dark brown, heavily barred birds breeding on the Atlantic coast; the two distinctive races of Willet have yet to be adequately illustrated in an identification guide. The nonbreeding adult Ruddy Turnstone (154c in plate 62), correctly described in the caption as "lacking all chestnut on upperparts," shows a great deal of chestnut in the illustration and looks more like an adult in worn breeding plumage. The reader should also be aware that many of the juveniles depicted throughout the plates are birds in very fresh plumage and, particularly among arctic nesters, most of the juveniles encountered south of the breeding grounds during fall migration have undergone some wear and are not as brightly marked or distinctive as some of the plates might suggest.

In a few of the plates, e.g., 43, 50, and 77, some of the smaller figures and illustrations of heads are not numbered, and in other plates, e.g., 32, 33, 42, 63, 75, 76, 78, and 82, some numbers have no letter suffix, leaving the reader to guess as to the species and/or plumage being depicted. For example, the head at the top left of plate 39, apparently a female Wilson's Plover, is not numbered. The tail pattern labeled 194 on plate 60 should read "149" (Spotted Sandpiper).

The most serious flaw in the plates is the manner in which some have been laid out. The artist, apparently in an attempt to depict as many plumages and postures as possible, has crammed a bewildering number of figures, in varying scales, into some of the plates. (Note especially plate 63 which has *forty* figures.) While the intent is laudable, the result is cluttered and confusing. Compounding the problem is that illustrations of some species, rather than being located directly opposite the corresponding captions on the facing page as would be expected, are scattered throughout the plate. Apparently the intent was to facilitate comparisons between species, but the reader is forced into a frustrating search through the plate to locate all of the plumages described and illustrated. *Strict* attention must be paid to the number/letter designations, although, as previously stated, these are lacking or incomplete in some instances. Many of the smaller figures, while attractive, add little but confusion and could have been omitted without compromising the quality or completeness of the plates.

Somewhat less than half of the book is devoted to species accounts, each divided into nine sections: Identification, Voice, Habits, Movements, Description, Age/Sex, Races, Measurements, and References. Each account, written in a succinct, telegraphic style, contains a remarkable amount of information, and, aside from a couple of typos, I can find nothing to fault in them.

It is not surprising to find that the authors have used a distinctly European terminology. Although titled *Shorebirds* (perhaps a concession to the American publisher), the European term "waders" is used throughout the text. A commendable attempt has been made to use the most sensible common names for species,

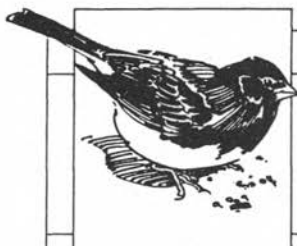
yet some parochial American readers may be temporarily confused by names such as Grey Plover (Black-bellied) and Lesser Sandplover (Mongolian Plover). The authors have chosen "breeding" and "non-breeding" to identify the two adult plumages often termed "alternate" and "basic," respectively, in American literature. The classification of the world's shorebirds is not without its nebulous areas; the number of species comprising the oystercatcher (Haematopodidae) and stilt (Recurvirostridae) families, for example, remains much debated. The authors' treatment ranges from liberal - recognizing eleven species of oystercatchers compared with as few as five species acknowledged by others - to conservative in recognizing only three species of stilts whereas some have proposed as many as nine species worldwide.

Most welcome, and all too often ignored in identification guides, is a fairly extensive bibliography, listing by my count 484 citations, although only about ten percent of these pertain specifically to identification with the remainder devoted primarily to various aspects of shorebird biology. The book is attractively designed and appears to be well-produced, though the binding on my copy cracked after less than two weeks use.

The novice birder will probably find the myriad species and plumages presented in *Shorebirds* overwhelming; the standard field guides remain a more suitable introduction. Anyone interested in birds, however, will find the beautiful illustrations and broad scope of the book appealing. In addition to being a valuable reference, it offers many hours of delightful browsing. There are some truly bizarre shorebirds in this world!

Shorebirds is the best of its genre yet to appear. Ultimately, however, its legacy may prove to be not so much its significant contribution to our rapidly expanding knowledge of avian identification but rather in the role it is likely to play in fostering a general awareness and appreciation of this remarkable group of birds and eventually, it is hoped, in their conservation throughout the world. The authors and artist should feel a profound sense of pride and satisfaction in this exceptional effort.

BLAIR NIKULA is a regional editor for *American Birds*, a regular contributor to *Bird Observer*, and has been responsible for a number of rare bird sightings in Massachusetts, among them Long-billed Curlew, Little Stint, Swainson's Warbler, Brown-chested Martin, White-tailed Tropicbird, and Mississippi Kite.



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