

BOOK REVIEW

by Paul M. Roberts

A Field Guide to Hawks: North America by William S. Clark. Illustrations by Brian K. Wheeler. 1987. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Peterson Field Guide Series, No. 35, 198 pages. 24 color and 2 black-and-white plates; 241 black-and-white photos; 32 maps. \$19.95 clothbound; \$13.95 paperback.

This thirty-fifth volume in the Peterson field guide series is a milestone. It is the most comprehensive and widely available identification guide to North American hawks ever published. Its success will demonstrate whether there is a commercial market for good books on American raptors, while stimulating revisionism in hawk identification.

The guide is divided into five parts. There is a fourteen-page introduction, followed by 112 pages of text and maps on the field identification of thirty-nine species of diurnal raptors. The text, including range maps, is sandwiched around twenty-four color and two black-and-white plates. In the plate section, each left-hand page contains brief descriptions of the field characters of the birds depicted on the right, a format familiar to the users of Peterson's own birding guides. The fourth section consists of forty-two pages of black-and-white photographs. The book concludes with a fourteen-page list of references, followed by a nine-page index to the references by species and topic, and by a two-page index.

The book's scope is quite narrow -- surprisingly. This is evident in the brief, disappointing introduction. Any volume in the Peterson field guide series is presumably intended for a broad audience, and should provide a good, albeit brief, introduction to the subject. This book does not attempt such an introduction. A number of basic questions are not addressed. What are hawks? (Clark's definition of the common understanding of the term seems much too narrow.) How closely are hawks related to owls? What are the systematics of North American raptors, and what is their significance, if any, for the lay reader? How representative are North American hawks of hawks around the world?

Further, there is no discussion of predation or of the role of predators in the environment. What is the significance of the hawks' position in the food chain? What is the nature of the relationship between hawks and humans? Clark fails to discuss how humans have been, and are, affecting the population status of hawks through shooting, pollution, and habitat destruction, or even restoration programs.

Curiously, Clark also does not describe when and where people are most likely to see hawks. Nor does he discuss migration as a special topic or refer the

reader to any hawk conservation or education organizations, such as Hawk Mountain or the Hawk Migration Association.

Clark did not avoid these topics to devote more time and space to stepping beginners through the learning processes of hawk identification. Only three woefully inadequate pages are given to the subject of *how* to identify hawks, and they are poorly written. Clearly, there is a question as to whom this book is directed. The introduction indicates it is not the beginning hawkwatcher!

The introduction does, however, state that the author's objective "is to present the latest in tried and proven field marks and behavioral characteristics by which the thirty-three regular and six accidental North American diurnal raptors may be accurately identified. These field marks and characteristics should enable anyone, with a little practice, to accurately identify most flying and perched diurnal raptors when they are *seen clearly* (italics mine)."

The second section of the book is the most thorough discussion of the identification of North American hawks available today. For almost a decade, Clark has been working to elevate and refine the field identification of North American hawks. His growth in skill and knowledge from his early articles on buteos and eagles to this book is obvious.

The detailed, well-structured text achieves the stated objectives. Each species account provides a general description of the species, noting differences in plumage and colors of the soft parts by age, sex, color morph, and race or form. Similar-looking species are identified and differentiated, followed by brief descriptions of flight and behavior. The accounts also discuss status and distribution, fine points, unusual plumages (albinism, etc.), subspecies status, etymology, and measurements. In only a few instances, regrettably, does Clark describe voice. Life histories are not provided.

Clark's species accounts are of limited utility in the field precisely because his descriptions of field characters require that you see the bird well. Most hawks are not seen so well! Nevertheless, the text alone is worth the price of the book. This is a unique goldmine of information. No other single book or article provides such extensive descriptions of the plumages of all of North America's hawks, including the various morphs of some of our most confusing species, such as Red-tailed, Swainson's, and Rough-legged Hawk. Anyone hawkwatching in western North America should especially benefit from this book. Clark also describes in some detail the sequence of oft-confusing plumages in Bald and Golden eagles (without adequately concluding whether or not it is possible to age eagles by plumage). His descriptions of Northern Harrier, Rough-legged Hawk, Gyrfalcon, and eagle plumages provide significant new information that should also be addressed in technical articles supported by photographs and statistics.

The text is not without faults, however. There are a fair number of relatively minor editorial errors, beginning with incorrect references to the end papers in the table of contents. The prose, which conveys little enthusiasm for its subject, is at times awkward, occasionally confusing. In the introduction, several descriptions under "How to Identify Hawks" can only perplex the reader who refers to the text sections on kites, buteos, and eagles. In the species accounts, the description of tail-banding on the Zone-tailed Hawk is not well phrased. Under Rough-legged Hawk, Clark writes, "Plumage characters can be used to determine sex for most adults, but some adults occur in the plumage of the other sex." What? This does little to resolve some questions raised by Tom Cade's paper on roughlegs three decades ago. How extensive is this rough-legged crossdressing? How reliable, how desirable, is it to attempt to age and sex roughlegs in the field?

There are two significant intentional omissions in the text. First, as noted earlier, Clark makes little mention of voice, advising readers to learn vocalizations in the field or use records or tapes such as in the Peterson series. The latter are inadequate for most diurnal raptor vocalizations, and any field study would have been facilitated by some suggestive descriptions and attempts at mnemonics.

A more significant shortcoming is Clark's decision to eschew describing the jizz of birds in flight. Clark elects to describe essentially what can be proven in photographs and specimens, focusing on plumages and the colors of soft parts. He does not delve deeply into the gray areas of typical or comparative behavior or overall appearance, where there are lesser degrees of certainty. Descriptions under "Flight," "Behavior," and "Similar Species" are brief and limited in scope. This is regrettable in that quite often in the field it is easier to perceive the jizz of a bird than subtle features of plumage, as Harrison acknowledges in his excellent guide to seabirds. To learn about jizz, eastern hawkwatchers are advised to read *Hawk Watch* by Peter Dunne and the staff of the Cape May Bird Observatory.

The plates, the third section, may be more controversial than the text. My first reaction on seeing them was one of disappointment, a sentiment I heard from others as well. Wheeler's birds do not look alive, though his depictions of perched birds seem much more lifelike than those of birds in flight. The latter appear to have torsos drawn from a template. However, as I have used the book and compared it with the standard American birding guides, I have gradually concluded that Brian Wheeler's illustrations are technically the most accurate and the best (especially on plumage) available in any American field guide. His skills have improved considerably over what was demonstrated in the eagle plates published in *American Birds* in 1983. His work is now subtler, more sophisticated, and more precise.

A unique feature of the plates must be mentioned. Clark discusses, and Wheeler depicts in head-on views, distinctive wing attitudes of soaring and gliding birds, an extremely useful field mark to beginners and savants alike. It should be noted, however, that contrary to Clark's description, Broad-winged Hawks often soar with a noticeable, shallow, stiff dihedral. (At least in Massachusetts!)

The book would have benefited from extensive use of supplementary silhouette drawings as used by Peterson in the original edition of his field guide to the birds and by Porter, Willis, et al. in their *Flight Identification of European Raptors*. It is usually easier to see the relative size, shape, and patterns of contrast on a hawk in the field than it is to see subtle differences in plumage or the color of soft parts such as the iris or cere. Silhouette figures in the text could have drawn the beginner's attention to critical field marks quicker and more easily than the distractions of a more aesthetically pleasing color plate.

In general, there is very good agreement between text and illustrations, though the roughleg illustrated on plate 10 does not depict the wings reaching the tail. Nor does the adult broadwing on the same plate appear to have "unmarked" underwings. "Detached wings" and other body parts occasionally depicted on the already crowded plates are often not, or only poorly, identified, causing unnecessary confusion. (See Plates 9, 10, 11, 20, and 21 in particular.)

The fourth section of the book, the black-and-white photographs, is disappointing. Any book with 42 pages of hawk photographs should be worth \$13.95 for the photos alone. This book is not. Some photographs are decidedly out of focus, perhaps more accurately reflecting what you see in the field most of the time. Other photos apparently did not transfer well from original color transparencies. Further, all the photos are printed on an unsatisfactory stock. To top it off, the photos are so crammed onto the page (in two instances, nine photos on one page) that it is impossible to have much text identifying the critical field marks purportedly visible. There are 241 halftones jammed onto only 42 pages of a book that is less than 5 x 8 inches. The section is helpful but could be so much more than it is.

The final section of the book consists of fourteen pages of references, plus a nine-page index to the references by species and topic. Both are outstanding, and highly unusual for the Peterson series. However, they also raise again the question as to whom this book is addressed. The list of "general references" is brief and fails to cite the superb introduction to hawks by Leslie Brown, *Birds of Prey: Their Biology and Ecology*. Nor is any mention made of the excellent introductory guides to hawk identification and migration, such as *Hawk Watch*, *The Mountain and the Migration*, or to the ubiquitous silhouette guides, one of which Clark coauthored. The excellent (and inexpensive) educational materials available through Cornell University are not mentioned either. Meanwhile, the

species references are to journals that are practically inaccessible to most people that Houghton Mifflin expects will buy this book. (Ironically, only by examining these references will many people appreciate the wealth of material provided by Clark and Wheeler.)

In summary, it is regrettable that Clark and Wheeler adopted such a narrow approach to hawk identification. The Peterson series provides an excellent opportunity to introduce millions of people to birds of prey, to stimulate their interest in, and appreciation of, hawks. This volume does not do that very well. Many novice hawkwatchers will find it difficult to use in the field. Clark does not satisfactorily address the issues and problems confronting them. Beginners should still be directed to the silhouette guides and to the excellent introductory guides cited earlier, especially *Hawk Watch*, to be used in conjunction with Clark and Wheeler.

However, none of these criticisms should detract from Clark and Wheeler's tremendous achievement. Anyone interested in hawks should have *A Field Guide to Hawks*. Experienced hawkwatchers will refer to this lode of detail for years to come. Perhaps only hawk lovers can fully appreciate that the first Peterson field guide devoted to an order of birds was done on *hawks*! No longer must you spend ten years in the field at the foot of a sage to learn all the plumages. (Jizz is a slightly different matter, however.) Clark and Wheeler have changed the world of hawk identification. Everyone with an interest in hawks is indebted to them.

I would like to thank Leif J. Robinson for his comments on this book, which were helpful in the preparation of this review.

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