

BOOK REVIEW: *THE BIRDER'S HANDBOOK*

by Paul J. Baicich

The Birder's Handbook: A Field Guide to the Natural History of North American Birds by Paul R. Ehrlich, David S. Dobkin, and Darryl Wheye. 1988. Illustrations by Shahid Naeem. New York: Simon and Schuster (Fireside). 816 pages. \$14.95 softcover; \$24.95 hardcover.

This book is certainly different, perhaps unique. You have only to thumb through it casually to realize that you are holding something novel in the way of a North American bird book. Weighing in at over 2 pounds and 5 ounces, it is still amazingly compact (5.5 x 8.5 x 1.75 inches), especially when one considers what is contained between its covers. The authors have undertaken to supply life history details about every North American bird species nesting regularly on the continent north of Mexico plus extensive general information about the natural history and biology of birds in a field-guide format—a book that birders will want to carry along, at least in the car, as a field book.

Throughout the main text, the left-hand pages summarize the life history of each of nearly 650 North American breeding species (including extinct species such as the Passenger Pigeon), two to a page. The right-hand pages provide short essays (250 in all) on a wide range of ornithological topics, which may or may not relate to the species described across the way on the left-hand pages.

Species Treatments (left-hand pages). The title line of each account gives the common name of the bird followed by the species binomial and the author of the scientific name; e.g., Common Nighthawk is followed by *Chordeiles minor* Forster.

The second line of the species account is a reference line that compactly lists the pages on which the species can be found in seven standard field guides. The *Handbook* is promoted as a companion to field guides, which the authors presume birders have already selected. Hence, there are no species illustrations in the book but only this reference line. (There are black-and-white drawings and helpful charts throughout the book to illustrate the essays.)

Next in each account is a "summary line" which indicates in a condensed form by abbreviations, numbers, and graphics numerous facts about where the species builds its nest, the type of nest and sex of parent that builds it, the type and number of eggs and breeding system, incubation and development, primary diet and ancillary food preferences, and foraging techniques. A key to the graphic symbols is conveniently reproduced on the inside covers for quick reference.

The subsequent text expands on the subjects in the summary line (breeding, nest, eggs, and diet), adds some particulars on conservation (especially dealing

with wintering grounds), offers additional notes of interest about behavior, and lists references to essays in the book that concern the species and to relevant sources in the lengthy bibliography in the index.

The contents of the left-hand pages are very impressive. Each short species treatment is superb, jam-packed and bursting with information. The overall result is both valuable and important. There is little that the authors miss here, though I noticed a few lapses in incubation or fledging periods for such species as Short-tailed Hawk, White-crowned Pigeon, Ringed Kingfisher, and Gray Kingbird. The coverage of conservation is particularly welcome, with vital material on the winter ranges and threatened neotropical habitats for each species.

A few things, however, bothered me. The graphics used in the summary lines are interesting, but one wonders if the little pictures of cups, cliffs, bushes, etc. tend toward the gimmicky. Also Ehrlich, Dobkin, and Wheye are unique in listing only one dimension for egg size—length; to omit information about the width is an unfortunate economy of space, especially when length is given, redundantly, in both inches and millimeters. Another problem is the taxonomic order. True to typical field-guide format, the sequence of species in the book frequently departs from the current AOU taxonomic order. I am afraid that if this practice continues, many birders will never get the 1983 AOU sequence quite right in their own minds.

Although the authors have a point about conservation, I question the value of including extinct birds such as Labrador Duck, Great Auk, Carolina Parakeet, and Passenger Pigeon in the species accounts when there is no treatment of species like Clay-colored Robin and Black-capped Gnatcatcher, birds which have now nested in North America on multiple occasions. On the other hand, the Rufous-capped Warbler is included on the basis of a sole nest that was abandoned after four eggs were laid.

A more serious flaw was discovered when I checked the author/date citations given as "Refs." at the end of the treatment paragraphs in some of the species accounts. Although the 63-page bibliography is marvelously up-to-date, I encountered over a dozen such citations in the text that were missing from it. To check this for yourself, start with the woodpeckers.

The Essays (right-hand pages). These essays are fine. Indeed some should be read time and again. They are short, informative, and almost uniformly well-written. They include topics as diverse as "Birds and DNA," "Piracy," and "Polyandry in the Spotted Sandpiper." Some effort has been made, where feasible, to position essay topics near a species or group that the information is relevant to. For example, essays on "Hovering Flight" and "Metabolism" occur within the hummingbird pages, "Distraction Display" falls opposite Killdeer, "Hoarding Food" is across from Acorn Woodpecker, and

"Hybridization" across from Blue-winged Warbler—all appropriate juxtapositions of subject matter and species that naturally stimulate the birder to read and learn more about bird behavior and biology. The more general essays are randomly distributed and sometimes divided into sections ("Bird Names" has fifteen parts) to allow placement near one of the species discussed. Fortunately, the authors have provided a very satisfactory subject index that enables the reader to find the way back to a particular essay if the exact title or page number is forgotten. Another convenience is a running head at the bottom of the page listing the title of the essay on that page (similar heads on the left-hand pages list the bird group of the species on that page).

Does the book's format work? The arrangement of species descriptions on the left and essays on the right may take some time and practice to get used to. Moreover, to get the most out of the book, one must read thoroughly the thirty-page introduction, which is well worth the time and effort.

The *Handbook* has been compared with *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds* by John Terres (which is arranged in conventional encyclopedic form, has photos and illustrations galore, and outweighs it by six pounds) and to Christopher Leahy's *The Birdwatcher's Companion* (which has no species treatments but is more readable and often witty). Some observers have called the *Handbook* "Bent in a backpack." But it is difficult to categorize this book, because it is really two books combined in one and arranged in an unusual format. Perhaps it is *sui generis*. In short, this book can provide the birder a portable compendium of knowledge of North American birdlife.

Among the possible effects of the *Handbook* are these—it should engender greater appreciation of avian biology among birders, help answer many questions, and, more importantly, raise some new ones about North American birdlife. Thus, it may expand the horizon for many birders and even encourage some to undertake bird investigation. The authors repeatedly draw attention to opportunities for study in avian biology. The essay "How Do We Find Out About Bird Biology" on page 319 is an explanation of research and an invitation to further study that deserves to be committed to memory. Goodness, are we about to witness a movement away from field identification? I doubt it. But we might just experience a further enrichment of the birding scene with this book's appearance.

This review cannot close without reference to the authors. Paul R. Ehrlich, a member of the National Academy of Sciences, is Professor of Biology and Bing Professor of Populations Studies at Stanford University and is well-known for his population concerns, butterfly studies, and prolific writings (400 scientific articles and 20 books). He has recently "returned" to an early interest in birds. If the *Handbook* is any indication of the depth of his interest, we are all fortunate. David S. Dobkin is a Henry Rutgers Fellow and Assistant Professor of Zoology

at Rutgers University with many publications on ornithology and ecology including studies of hummingbird flower mites. Darryl Wheye, a biological consultant and writer based at Stanford, has worked on insect and avian relationships. Their collaboration has clearly been fruitful.

And finally, this book is unusual by virtue of its price. At a time when book costs are reaching absurd heights, it is delightful to encounter a reasonably priced bird book, one that would be cheap at twice the price.

PAUL J. BAICICH began birding in New York City as a youngster and joined the Queens County Bird Club at age fourteen, a "pivotal experience" for him. Paul believes that birding should be fun and a shared learning experience, should encompass an active conservation ethic, and include a current of scientific inquiry. He has a particular interest in Texas birds and especially enjoys birding in Alaska but has also birded in Europe, Israel, Mexico, Central and South America. He is a new member of the board of directors of the American Birding Association. Paul lives in Maryland and works in the airline industry.

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