

## BOOK REVIEW: *A FIELD GUIDE TO ADVANCED BIRDING*

by Robert Hilton

*A Field Guide to Advanced Birding: Birding Challenges and How to Master Them* by Kenn Kaufman. 1990. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Peterson Field Guide Series, No. 39. xiv + 299 pages; 105 black-and-white figures. \$22.95 clothbound, \$14.95 paperback.

This recent book is a welcome standout among the ever-increasing number of bird identification guides. Like the recent *Birding by Ear* guides, also in the Peterson Field Guide Series, it focuses only on certain species, in this case some of North America's most difficult identification problems. It is intended to supplement already available general field guides.

The book departs from the traditional Peterson guide format: missing are the plates with arrows pointing to key features and discrete accounts for individual species. There are neither range maps nor color plates. Instead we find thirty-five chapters illustrated with the author's own excellent black-and-white drawings, a fifteen-page annotated bibliography, an index, and four pages of illustrations inside the front and back covers. Two chapters have been written by other top field birders: dowitchers by Claudia Wilds and Thayer's Gull by Kevin Zimmer.

The opening chapter, "Challenges in Birding and How to Approach Them," begins by outlining the idea behind the book. Many serious birders began to push field identification beyond the standard pocket guides available in the 1960s. Some of the newly acquired information has appeared previously in articles scattered in many journals and recent field guides and has also spread by word of mouth. Some of this new information, not easy to fit into pocket guides covering all species, now appears in detailed form in this book. Vagrants are generally excluded; the book deals with regularly occurring North American species.

The section of Chapter 1 titled "Basic Rules of Field Identification" should be read by everyone, no matter how experienced, before using this book in the field. This section points out that, when birding, you should check every field mark on a bird, not rely on merely one; learn the common birds thoroughly by studying individual variation; consider shapes, molt, and feather wear; beware of misjudging size and colors; document a problem bird as thoroughly as possible; and question authority—the experts may be misinformed. Chapter 1 concludes with a terminology and topography section that lucidly illustrates head pattern, wing structure, tail structure, and body plumage terms. These illustrations are repeated inside the covers for easy reference in the field.

The core of the book is the twenty-six problems discussed in detail. Among

several which cover New England species are chapters on winter loons, scaup, Semipalmated and Western sandpipers, and *Empidonax* flycatchers. In each of these chapters, a section titled "The Problem" outlines the nature of the difficulty, sometimes giving a historical perspective. Most chapters continue with a "Preliminary Points" section (including what not to look for in *Empidonax* flycatchers) presenting background information that affects the interpretation of field marks or specific approaches to observing the group of birds under consideration. Several accounts also have a general "all-ages" field marks section preceding the more detailed discussion by age, season, or species. Chapter summaries and captions to the drawings condense information presented in the chapter, but you must read the chapter first!

Four chapters cover the basic features of identifying entire groups of species—shorebirds, gulls, fall warblers, and sparrows. Kaufman discusses shape and habitat for sparrows, and for warblers he mentions wingbars and face pattern. The principles set forth in these chapters can be applied to identify still other groups of birds. Four more chapters deal with miscellaneous species of ducks, gulls, terns, and fall warblers in lesser detail. These contain brief notes on certain problems, such as distinguishing Orange-crowned and Tennessee warblers.

Let us now examine one chapter in detail, Chapter 18, the medium-sized terns. Below the chapter heading appear the four species covered—Roseate, Common, Arctic, and Forster's terns. The problem is presented in half a page: these four species can be confused if atypical individuals are seen, secondary field marks are misinterpreted, or age and seasonal variations are not taken into account or understood properly. Two pages of preliminary points follow, discussing in detail age variation, underwing pattern, upperwing pattern, and seasonal variation in the molt cycle. Next Kaufman analyzes adult birds, field mark by field mark, giving attention to each one in detail and comparing each across species; he also treats the special problems concerning the separation of Forster's and Common terns. Illustrations show underwing pattern, flight silhouette with upperwing pattern, perched adults (all as seen in summer), and tail uppersides. Juveniles and first-winter birds are treated in a separate section, with a general discussion of immaturity, followed by a species-by-species critique. The juvenal plumage of each species as seen in mid-September is illustrated in both perched and flying birds (the latter shows the entire upperwing and the outer underwing). Finally, the chapter concludes with a note on hybrid terns.

The bibliography is a very important part of *A Field Guide to Advanced Birding*. Kaufman presents an annotated list of useful articles pertaining to the species discussed in earlier chapters, as well as a selection of books, journals, and magazines that contain field identification information about these and other

species. He also explains how to cite such information in a write-up documenting a rare-bird sighting.

I took this book with me on trips this summer in the mid-Atlantic region and used it when observing Semipalmated and Western sandpipers, dowitchers, and Common and Forster's terns. I found it very helpful, not only for those troublesome dowitchers, but also for adult peeps in molt. Some friends who last year observed a juvenal-plumaged Sharp-tailed Sandpiper said that this book does a good job explaining the points separating this species from Pectoral Sandpiper.

I once accidentally referred to this book in conversation as "the master guide" (with no slight intended to *The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding*), not only because it unravels some knotty identification problems with which I have struggled through the years (and pulled apart after painstaking study and consulting many references), but also because it emphasizes the careful approach to birding—scrutinizing each individual. One need not be an expert to profit from this guide, merely someone with a desire to study patiently some seemingly difficult local birds. I strongly recommend this book to those people, whatever their level of expertise, who want to sharpen their field identification skills and enhance their appreciation of the birds around them.

**ROBERT HILTON**, an editor on the staff of *Ecology Abstracts*, lives in Maryland. He has birded for twenty years and participated in breeding-bird atlases and censuses. Among his other interests are archeology, music, and languages. He has been birding every weekend since this book was published.

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