

BOOK REVIEWS: *Peterson Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe* and *Birds of Europe with North Africa and the Middle East*

by Mark Lynch

Peterson Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe, Fifth Edition by Roger Tory Peterson, Guy Mountfort, and P.A.D. Hollom; 1993; Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company; 480 pages; cloth \$24.95, paper \$19.95.

Birds of Europe with North Africa and the Middle East by Lars Jonsson; 1993; Princeton: Princeton University Press; 559 pages; \$45.00.

Of all field guides published for areas other than North America, those from Europe are of particular interest to American birders. A considerable degree of overlap exists between the species of our two geographical areas, especially among the non-Passeriformes, and it is useful to have additional identification information on species found in both areas. Furthermore, rare vagrants from Europe, such as the stints, Spotted Redshank, or Common Ringed Plover, are inadequately dealt with in North American guides. Finally, Europe has always seemed to me to be on the cutting edge of birding, and I am therefore curious about what is going on across the Atlantic.

How do European guides stack up to American ones? Can our field guides be improved? 1993 saw the release of two European field guides, neither one completely new, but both substantially changed from previous incarnations. I have had the pleasure of using older versions of both in the field several times during the last few years.

A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe by Peterson, Mountfort, and Hollom (hereinafter, the "Peterson guide") was a pretty poor publication going into the 1990s. It looked much like the Peterson guide for eastern North America from the 1950s. The plates were in the central section of the book, not opposite the text. Species illustrations were small and crowded together on the plates, and coloration was faded and undetailed. This was a guidebook begging for a complete overhaul.

The 1993 edition has been revised and is a case of good news and bad news. First the good news. Nineteen new plates have been added, thereby reducing the species crowding. Examples of the improvements can be seen on the plates for loons and grebes, rails, and the nightjars. Many illustrations have been repainted with an increase in detail and richness of color on plates such as those for the "grey" geese and the owls. Illustrations for ducks have less of the schematic, decoy look of the old Peterson style. Some of the improved plates from recent editions of the North American Peterson guides have been used in the new European guide. Examples are the plates for the scoters, eiders, and alcids. The text has been completely rewritten by D.I.M. Wallace, editor of the field character section of *Birds of the Western Palearctic* (Oxford University Press,

multiple volumes). The revised text is absolutely first rate. Descriptive pages have been increased from 226 pages to 261 pages.

The bad news is that too many of the sins of the past edition have gone uncorrected, and a few new ones have been committed. Field guides sink or swim on the quality of their illustrations. European field guides can be judged by looking at the plates of gulls, shorebirds, larks, pipits, and the Old World warblers. These groups of birds pose particular identification challenges both in the field and for the artist. The differences among the species are sometimes very subtle, and the artist must pay attention to "jizz" as well as plumage to create a picture that really helps with difficult species identification. How does the new European Peterson guide fare in these areas?

Unfortunately, the plates are still grouped together in the middle of the book rather than opposite the text, and the map section is at the end of the book. The overpopulated warbler plates have been reprinted with minimal changes. Most of the species are shown in the same monotonous field-guide stances, and their method of presentation does not help in field identification. The shorebird plates have been substantially expanded, but some are still no more than poor to fair in quality. Particularly unsatisfying are the plates of the stints and the peeps. Many illustrations have the diagrammatic look of painting done from a preserved specimen. The gull plates are still crowded, and a mere three plates cover all the regular and vagrant species in all their plumages. Furthermore, two of Europe's most interesting gulls, Audouin's and Slender-billed, are reduced to single postage stamp representations in breeding plumage. I suspect the reasoning behind much of this is to reduce the size of the book. But at what cost to the birder in the field?

One new element found in this edition has me completely baffled. In older versions of the Peterson guide many of the plates had a white background, which did not help the faded-looking bird illustrations. In an effort to correct this, new background colors have been added to many of the plates. Although some plates have been improved, others now have backgrounds in a riotous variety of annoying turquoises, aquamarines, deep blues, and lavenders. The effect is bizarrely distracting. Hopefully, this will be corrected in later editions.

The shortcomings of the Peterson guide are all the more dramatic when the book is directly compared with Lars Jonsson's much awaited *Birds of Europe with North Africa and the Middle East*. Lars Jonsson is a Swedish painter whose artistic passion is birds:

Birds are the mirror which give perspective to my inner being. They have long provided me with the strongest urge to paint (*Birds in Art*, 1990 exhibition catalogue organized by the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, page 22).

Jonsson's book is the final outcome of a project started in Sweden in the

1970s. He had previously written and illustrated four volumes on the birds of Europe called *Fagler I Naturen*, later printed in England by Penguin in 1978 and 1979 under the titles *Birds of Sea and Coast*, *Birds of Mountain Regions*, and *Birds of Lake, River, Marsh, and Field*. These marvelously illustrated volumes were not widely available in North America and have become something of a collector's item. A fifth volume, *Birds of the Mediterranean and the Alps*, published in 1992, completed the series and was widely available on this side of the Atlantic. All five books have now been combined (with some additional material) into a single volume.

At 559 pages Jonsson's book is a hefty, but not unprecedented in size, field guide. (Do we really still expect field guides to fit into the back pocket of our jeans?) The text is excellent, but the depictions of the birds make it hard to concentrate on the writing. Open the book, and one is looking at living birds. Birds seem about to hop, walk, swim, or fly off every page. Yes, there are the traditional field-guide poses of the birds, but the book contains numerous pictures of the birds behaving in a natural way. A Grey Wagtail catches an insect streamside; a turnstone lives up to its name; a flock of Snow Finches wheel across an alpine pass; and juvenile crossbills drink from a pool. Birds are shown in unfamiliar as well as the familiar positions of most field guides. There are several head-on views of ducks, and many of the Passeriformes are shown in flight. Many plates show bits of habitat, and some have fully realized backgrounds. We are not used to seeing such rich artwork in a field guide. But the overall effect gives us a deeper understanding of the bird shown, not as it might appear on a museum shelf, but as it looks in the field. Jonsson has fundamentally changed our expectations for the quality of art that we can find in a field guide.

In addition to the superb depiction of individual birds, there is little crowding of species on a page. For example, two full pages of text and four full pages of artwork are devoted to the skuas (jaegers) alone. The difficult European warblers get thirty-five pages of text and art. Jonsson is most familiar to American birders as the coauthor (with Richard R. Veit) and illustrator of the seminal identification paper, "Field identification of the smaller sandpipers within the genus *Calidris* (*American Birds*, Summer 1987). Therefore it is not surprising that his field guide devotes eight pages to the stints. The rest of the shorebirds are painted as skillfully.

The section on gulls is likewise excellent, and Jonsson shows juvenile and adult plumages. His skill in doing so makes the book a worthwhile purchase for American birders who do not intend to go to Europe. Sometimes Jonsson may seem to indulge in an extravagant (for a field guide) use of space such as a two-page spread (with text) for a scene of Ruffs lekking, or two pages for several studies of the Gyrfalcon. Personally I relish this kind of artwork for the sense of the living bird it conveys.

Jonsson's birds are the work of an artist who spends a lot of time in the field. His consistent goal is to capture the appearance of birds active and wild, and he reflects on his efforts to do so in the foreword to *Birds of Europe* (page 4):

In the foreword to the first volume I wrote of the difficulty of gaining a "definitive" knowledge of the appearance of the common species such as House and Tree Sparrows, despite almost daily studies. I can verify with some thankfulness, that this impression has only been reinforced with the years. Each new contact with a species often provides some small detail or a deeper insight.

We could use this observation as a metaphor for guiding our own field experiences. I once had an all too brief conversation with Lars Jonsson. He called me at home just as I was about to leave for Australia, and I will always regret that I did not have more time to spend with him. I found it interesting that he did not want to talk about birds, but about the Winslow Homer watercolors in the Worcester Museum where I teach. This got me thinking about the difference between an illustrator and an artist, and whether an artist can also turn out a good field guide. The answer is Jonsson's *Birds of Europe*.

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*For registration and further information, contact: Andrea Jones,
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