

BOOK REVIEW: *A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America*

by Peter C. Alden

A Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Northern Central America by Steve N.G. Howell and Sophie Webb. 1995. New York: Oxford University Press. \$39.95 paper, \$75 cloth.

Not too many years ago, a trip to the western United States was a major expedition that would be the envy of those restricted to weekend birding at familiar haunts in Massachusetts. Going to Mexico or Guatemala was positively the end of beyond, particularly as there was no "Peterson."

From 1953 until 1972 one had to use Emmet Reid Blake's *Birds of Mexico: A Guide for Field Identification*: well organized and portable, but with no range maps, no voices, a hundred or so black-and-white drawings (many of U.S. species), and a single color plate of a Collared Aracari. On the dozens of birding trips I led down there in the 1960s we used only Blake. In 1966 *The Birds of Tikal* by Frank B. Smithe gave us color plates of a selection of Caribbean slope forest birds, very useful at Palenque, Chiapas. In 1969 my *Finding Birds in Western Mexico* was published by the University of Arizona Press. The beautiful plates by John O'Neill added about 100 species of Pacific slope specialties. Still, many hundreds of species were not illustrated.

In the early 1970s there were many hundreds of birders touring this new frontier alone and on birding tours. Suddenly, between 1970 and 1973, no less than four major field guides appeared: Hugh Land's *Birds of Guatemala*, Ernest P. Edward's *A Field Guide to the Birds of Mexico*, Roger Tory Peterson and Edward L. Chalif's *A Field Guide to Mexican Birds and Adjacent Central America*, and L. Irby Davis' *A Field Guide to the Birds of Mexico and Central America*. This was followed by a long period when relatively few birders focused on Mexico and Guatemala due to media reports on tourist muggings in Mexico and a civil war in Guatemala. Traveling birders started to focus on Belize, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Ecuador, East Africa, India, and Australia, while Mexican wildlife tourism appeared to center on small luxury cruises to Baja and the Gulf of California (an area lacking in endemic birds).

From November 1981 onward, Steve Howell and Sophie Webb, author and artist team, began an intensive and exhaustive field exploration of thousands of sites in these countries, combed research papers, grilled colleagues for details, and prepared plates and range maps for a monumental book. Steve grew up in Britain, and it's a bit of a slap to American ornithologists that none of "us" would devote a decade to producing such a superb compendium of knowledge on our neighboring republic and winter home to so many of "our" birds.

The book itself covers 1070 species from Tijuana to western Nicaragua,

with 1087 maps, 71 color plates, and 44 linecuts. You might note that it does not call itself a field guide, and it is rather heavy to take in the field. While all birders traveling to these lands will want to own this great work, I presume that in the field only one person in a party will be forced to carry this, while the others will use the Peterson and Chalif guide as a quick reference. The accurate plates by Sophie Webb are most comprehensive in plumages and include a number of diverse subspecies for the first time. As in all the other guides, most species present in the United States and covered abundantly in U.S. field guides are not illustrated. You will have to bring a U.S. guide as well, unless you know all such species cold.

The range maps (for all species), the detailed descriptions of voices, and the attention to habitats, subspecies, and similar species are all of high quality. Much of this information is presented for the first time. The descriptions, while painstakingly accurate and complete, suffer from extreme length. It took 462 words to describe the Hook-billed Kite. Roger Peterson once said that anyone can write ten pages on any bird, but it is an art to capture its essence and key field characters in a few sentences. The front matter chapters and the appendices (particularly those on offshore islands) are all worth active inspection. I would have loved to see a chapter on bird finding, but with the extant size and weight, I realize this could not be included.

Kudos to Steve and Sophie for this incredible volume. I presume many more birders will now head south of the border for their own enjoyment and to refine even further our knowledge of this rich avifauna.

PETER C. ALDEN lives in Concord, Massachusetts, and is a freelance safari and wildlife tour leader, cruise lecturer, and author. In travels to over 100 countries on seven continents, he has seen well over 5000 bird species, but no longer keeps track of numbers. Recent travel gigs have included Greenland, Baffin Island, and Antarctica (Overseas Adventure Travel); New Zealand, South Africa, Namibia, Tanzania, and Venezuela (Friends of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University); Tanzania (Massachusetts Audubon Society); and Indonesia and Malaysia (Pearl Cruises). His most recent book is the *National Audubon Society Field Guide to Africa Wildlife* (Chanticleer Press: A. Knopf). He currently is working on a series of regional North American field guides.