

BOOK REVIEW: Monographs About Birds: A Bewildering Assortment

by William E. Davis, Jr.

The number of bird books available today is truly overwhelming. If you pick up an American Birding Association sales catalog, you will be confronted by so many book selections that the inside front cover has a subject index. The subjects cover a plethora of regional bird-finding guides, field guides, state bird books and associated checklists, cassette tapes, videos, items for the computer, and last but not least, monographs. What should you buy with your limited supply of dollars?

The focus of this review is the ornithological monograph, a class of bird books that are currently being published in increasingly large numbers. This review is not exhaustive, but it is aimed at providing some historical perspective on bird monographs and examples of some of the more important and interesting currently available monograph series. This type of publication has long been central to the scientific ornithological literature, but many monographs should be of interest to the amateur birding public as well.

The Random House Dictionary defines a monograph as "a treatise on a particular subject . . . an account of a single thing or class of things, as of a species or animals . . . a highly detailed and thoroughly documented study or paper written about a limited area of a subject or field of inquiry." Broadly interpreted, monographs would include almost any book that treats a limited subject in depth but is generally restricted in ornithological usage to the treatment of a particular species or family of birds, or to the birds of a particular region. Like many category definitions, monograph boundaries are somewhat flexible, particularly for regional bird books. In general, identification as a monograph is strongly associated with the degree to which a book is considered "scientific."

The writing of monographs about birds has been a standard approach for biologists for more than a century. Perhaps the most famous nineteenth century bird monographs were by John Gould, whose lavish lithograph illustrations (done by other people) were complemented by thorough scientific text. His *Monograph of the Trochilidae* (hummingbirds) and *Birds of Australia*, for example, are paragons of nineteenth century ornithological publication and bring vast sums at auction houses around the world. These were always aimed at a wealthy and elitist market and graced the libraries of kings. More recently, the New Naturalist series from Great Britain has set the tone for monographs that were aimed at the serious amateur as well as professional ornithologists, and increasingly appeal to the casual birder. Established in 1942, the stated aim of the series is to interest the general reader in the wildlife of Great Britain, although many titles in the series are more broadly based and deal with birds

that are found in North America as well as Europe (e.g., gulls, puffins, fulmars). The series has two parts. The main series deals with broader groups of animals and plants, but the New Naturalist Monographs (or Special Volumes) usually deal with a single species, many of them birds. They include real classics of behavioral ecology such as Niko Tinbergen's *Herring Gull's World*. My collection begins with number 2, *The Redstart*, published in 1950, and my most recent acquisition is number 71, *British Warblers* (1985). They are all designed to be very readable, but they contain an enormous wealth of natural history information and references, which would be of interest to the more serious bird student and to the professional ornithologist.

Great Britain continues to dominate much of the bird monograph production. Academic Press, for example, publishes a number of bird monographs aimed at the professional ornithologist (e.g., *Storks, Ibises, and Spoonbills of the World* and *Sperm Competition in Birds*, both published in 1992). They also publish the United States editions of the T&AD Poyser monographs, which are of particular importance because they have recently included monographs on North American birds. For example, the recent titles of *The Ancient Murrelet* (1992), *The Magpies* (1991), and *The Pinyon Jay* (1992) all cover North American birds, and *Great Auk Islands* (1993) deals mostly with arctic Canada. These are all high quality and readable books. There may be a little bit more information about a bird species than you really want to know, but they are great reference books, look great on the shelf, and make your friends think you know a lot. The only drawback is the price—Academic Press books tend to be very expensive, but the above listed monographs go for \$35-40, not that bad for an excellent hard-backed book these days.

Oxford University Press also produces fine monographs on birds (e.g., most recently, *The Starling* and *Feral Pigeons*) and has recently begun publishing a series of monographs on bird families of the world. The first three, published in 1995, deal, respectively, with the hornbills, penguins, and megapodes (the fascinating mound-building "incubator" birds of the Australasian region). These are really for the hard-core ornithologist and are expensive at \$60, but they are excellent reference monographs. Cambridge University Press has also produced some excellent monographs, including Alan Poole's *Ospreys: A Natural and Unnatural History* (1989).

Among North American presses, Princeton University Press published *Kingfishers, Bee-eaters, and Rollers* in 1992 and *Finches and Sparrows* in 1993. The former is subtitled a handbook and the latter an identification guide, but both are similar in structure and style to the Houghton Mifflin Helm Series guides, reviewed by Mark Lynch in the February 1996 issue of *Bird Observer*. All of these titles qualify as monographs. Smithsonian Institution Press has produced such bird monographs as Robert Nero's *The Great Gray Owl*, Keith Bildstein's *White Ibis* (1993), and a number of Paul Johnsgard's seemingly

endless series of monographs, including *Cormorants, Darters, and Pelicans of the World*. In addition, Smithsonian Institution Press now handles books published by the International Council for Bird Preservation (now American Bird Conservancy in the United States) (e.g., *Status and Conservation of the World's Seabirds* [1984]) and copublished with them *Threatened Birds in the Americas* (1992). These books should interest those people with a particular interest in conservation.

Dozens of other bird monographs have been published over the last several decades by American publishing companies and university presses. In general, the monographs from these publishers are not as technical as the European-produced books and hence may make for easier reading for most amateurs. More technical books include the forty-seven *Ornithological Monographs* thus far published by the American Ornithologists' Union and the sixteen titles in the *Studies in Avian Biology* series published by the Cooper Ornithological Society.

Closer to home, the Nuttall Ornithological Club of Cambridge has published two monograph series, *Memoirs* and *Publications*. The former dates back to 1886, when William Brewster's monograph *Bird Migration* was published, and was replaced by the *Publications* series in 1957. Recently, however, *Memoirs* has been reestablished as a series primarily concerned with the history of ornithology. Both series are primarily scientific in focus but the most recent monographs in each, *Contributions to the History of North American Ornithology* (Davis and Jackson, editors, 1995) and *Nearctic Passerine Migrants in South America* (Paynter 1995) are less technical and of more general interest.

The supply of monographs for the average reader is abundant. The variety of birds covered and the broad spectrum of scope, technical level, and cost boggles the mind. But with so much available it is worth it to take the time to browse through a few bookstores and libraries for monographs that would further stimulate your interest and pleasure derived from birds.

WILLIAM E. DAVIS, JR., president of Bird Observer, prepares "About the Cover" for each issue and has contributed to *Bird Observer* articles and book reviews on a variety of topics.

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