

**BOOK REVIEW: *Birdfinder: A Birder's Guide
to Planning North American Trips***

by Bruce Hallett

Birdfinder: A Birder's Guide to Planning North American Trips (ABA Birdfinding Guide Series) by Jerry A. Cooper. Colorado Springs. American Birding Association, 1995, spiral binding, 374 pages, \$17.95.

Birding and travel go together like Tom Glavine and off-speed pitches. The home park is fun, but there is nothing like taking off on a birding trip to a new location. New birds, new photographs, new experiences and new laughs all combine to reduce adults to excited "power rangers." The difficulty, however, is not deciding to go tripping but where. Almost all of North America now has some type of birdfinding guide, but that means sifting through a huge stack of books and literature to determine a location. To the rescue along comes Jerry Cooper's new book, *Birdfinder: A Birder's Guide to Planning North American Trips*, published in late 1995 by the American Birding Association. As the author states in his introduction, the book is not intended to replace area birdfinding guides, only to supplement them. By providing enough elements of information in over thirty key locations, mostly in the United States and Canada, he has made the task of choosing and planning a trip much easier and more convenient.

Reading the introduction to the text, while a little long, is necessary not only for an explanation of how the chapters work but also for some overall information about developing a trip plan. The author also injects (and I think correctly) some of his philosophy about travel, companionship, appreciation, and ethics.

Chapters 1-19 cover the major birding areas (better known as hot spots) from California, Arizona, and Colorado in the west to Texas and the Maritimes in the east. Also included are winter trips to Minnesota and Oklahoma (the author was born there) plus a summer safari to western Washington and southwest British Columbia. The last chapter (20) is titled the Baker's Dozen and describes, in less detail, another thirteen prime locations that were omitted from the previous chapters: Cape May, Point Pelee, Churchill, the Platte River, and coastal Massachusetts are among the notable hot spots. Most of these locations will be quite familiar to veteran birders and high on the "wish-list" for newcomers. A nice organizational touch is that the main chapters and the Baker's Dozen are chronologically arranged by month so one can either pick a month and find a location, or one can go to Oklahoma in January in Chapter 2 and then hit west Texas in early July in Chapter 14.

In each of the ten chapters the contents are broken down into sections. First, there is a general section which summarizes information about the area followed

by a list of the appropriate birdfinding guides and a listing of rare bird alert numbers. The author provides a short paragraph about special equipment needs such as scope, gear, or bug sprays, and which towns have motels (no specifics). To keep travel costs down, the accommodations section discusses camping possibilities also. I found that the two most useful features of each chapter were the key species section and the sample itinerary. The key species are those birds that make that area unique and are most likely the main reason for taking the trip in the first place. The author annotates this list with short comments about location and the observation chances. The sample itinerary is quite detailed and extremely useful for planning purposes, especially if you have time constraints.

In addition to the target birds, three other lists for each area include probable, possible, and remotely possible species. These lists are nicely tucked away along the sides of the pages so they do not overwhelm the text. The bold-faced species in the probable list are there to tell the traveler that these birds appear no more than four times on all the other lists in the book. Thus, if possible, birders better make the effort to find these species. When the trips have been completed, there is a section in the chapter where actual totals may be compared with potentials. I have only two complaints about this aspect. First, I disagree with some of the choices for the probable list when I think they should be on the possible list, but then I always seem to find these types of guides a little too optimistic about finding certain species. Second, I thought the listing discussion a bit excessive when tallying up the results of the potential, expected, actual, and cumulative numbers. If you are into this, you will love it. If not, it can be easily ignored.

A very comprehensive birdfinding chart is at the end of the twenty chapters. The author lists the 650-odd species that were mentioned in the text and that you might find if you took every trip in the book. Every species is keyed to each chapter and location including the Baker's Dozen. The obvious advantage to this is that you can pick a species, such as Ferruginous Hawk or Connecticut Warbler and know where and when to give it a try. Furthermore, the latest nomenclature changes and the latest splits from the American Ornithologists Union (e.g., Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow, Bicknell's Thrush) have been incorporated into the chart. I was impressed with such an information-friendly chart.

It is worth mentioning the American Birding Association's (ABA) influence on this text. Since the ABA published the book as part of their ABA Birdfinding Guide Series, the production of the book is first-rate. The format is open and easy to read, the maps are great, there are some nice illustrations, and the book will lie flat on your desk or lap. ABA has a number of other publications such as a membership directory, a monthly newsletter, a magazine, and a sales catalog. The author, Jerry Cooper, makes a number of references to all of these ABA publications, and while they are very helpful, it is not totally necessary to be an

ABA member with access to these materials in order to benefit from the book.

When I first received a copy of this book, I was skeptical that it was going to be overly redundant when compared with other similar titles. I was pleasantly surprised that it fulfilled quite well its purpose as a planning guide. Several of the locations were ones that I have birded extensively both personally and with groups, and I found the information about them accurate. Yes, I have some quibbles with some of the species lists, but I feel that is small compared to the overall value. In short, two thumbs up. It would have been an "enthusiastic" two thumbs up but there were no directions anywhere for strawberry rhubarb pie!

BRUCE HALLETT, a resident of Brookline, Massachusetts, for eleven years, moved to Atlanta, Georgia, in August 1989 and conducts birding tours from there. Over the past 2.5 years, he has spent a considerable amount of time in the Bahamas archipelago photographing birds and researching birding locations. Although he still carries an old emotional attachment to the boys of summer from Fenway Park, he now does the tomahawk chop for the 1995 world champions, Atlanta Braves.

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