

**Book Reviews: *How Birds Migrate* and
*Diary of a Left-handed Birdwatcher***

by John Kricher

How Birds Migrate by Paul Kerlinger. 1995. Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books. 228 pages with numerous black-and-white illustrations. \$16.95 (softcover).

Many attributes of birds attract us to them but perhaps none more so than the remarkable phenomenon of migration. Dr. Paul Kerlinger, until recently the director of the Cape May Bird Observatory, is one of the foremost experts on bird migration, having published numerous studies in professional journals, particularly on the subject of raptor migration ecology. Dr. Kerlinger is perhaps best known for his critically acclaimed book *Flight Strategies of Migrating Hawks* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), a rather technical volume dealing specifically with raptors. In the present volume, written for the nonprofessional, Dr. Kerlinger expands his scope to include all classes of migrant birds. Otherwise, the topics covered in the fifteen chapters reflect much of what was in his previous book, though presented in far less technical style.

Kerlinger has crafted an ideal primer on bird migration. It is a lively and educational book covering virtually all topics relating to migration that inspire curiosity and wonder among birders: why birds migrate, how migration is studied, why so many species migrate at night, the effects of weather, flight speeds, distances, navigation, flocking behavior, stopover sites, call notes, and conservation issues—and this list is by no means exhaustive. The style of the book is unique in that scattered among the main text are brief "case studies," each concisely summarizing an example from the published literature; indeed, many come from Kerlinger's own work. For example, in a case study about Snowy Owl migration, Kerlinger describes how he and another researcher examined over 800 museum skins to determine that adult female Snowy Owls remain farthest north while immature males migrate farthest south.

Because of his work as director of the Cape May Bird Observatory, Paul Kerlinger is highly skilled in speaking to general audiences, and his talent as a teacher shows throughout this book. For example, he explains, tongue tightly in cheek, that you could mail two wood warblers anywhere in the United States for the price of a first-class stamp—each bird only weighs about fourteen grams—but of course the warblers might prefer to fly instead. The image helps the reader comprehend the remarkable phenomenon of such tiny creatures navigating among continents.

The text includes examples from all over the world but, understandably, is most focused on North America. Readers familiar with Cape May, NJ, will not be disappointed to find that many examples are taken from Kerlinger's work

there. There is much information to be gleaned from this book and, as reader-friendly as it is, it can easily be read more than once. After a spring morning birding in Mount Auburn Cemetery or at Marblehead Neck, or an autumn day at Plum Island of Wachusett Mountain, I can think of no better book to sort out the many questions that are raised by seeing migration as it happens. But, come to think of it, on those cold winter days when there are precious few birds to be found, this book could help you pass the hours and prepare for the next coming of the migrant birds.

The book is illustrated throughout with drawings and maps that enhance the teaching quality of the text.

Diary of a Left-handed Birdwatcher by Leonard Nathan. 1996. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press. 145 pages, no illustrations. \$18.95 (hardcover).

After reading this diminutive and slender volume, authored by a noted California poet, I wondered what I had just read. How to describe it—eclectic, imaginative, musing, clever, introspective, entertaining, insightful, naive, profound? You'll have to decide for yourself. I still haven't. But you should read it, that much I can say with certainty. It will hold your interest and make you think hard about what, exactly, it is that makes us all "bird observers."

Leonard Nathan is a retired professor (Department of Rhetoric at The University of California at Berkeley), oft-published and award-winning poet, and birder (though he strongly prefers the term "birdwatcher"). He and his friends, identified in this book only as "Thursday's Children," weekly (guess which day) patrol such places as Point Reyes National Seashore in search of whatever avian regulars and rarities they can discover. But one species above all seizes upon Nathan's fascination: the Snow Bunting. He craves to see one, preferably more than one, and desires to see the species really well. Now, Point Reyes, just north of San Francisco, is not like Plum Island or the Outer Cape. Snow Buntings are, at all seasons, rare around the Bay Area, indeed very rare.

So why does Leonard Nathan want so much to see a Snow Bunting? I must defer to Nathan here and let you read his words for yourself. But I will tell you that he expects that the experience of seeing Snow Buntings will be an epiphany of sorts, a kind of vision of the Holy Grail explaining the workings, the meanings, the very essence of nature, and of his relationship to it. And this epiphany will be one of deep feeling, the Grail transcribed mostly in the language of emotion rather than objectivity. Nathan is, after all, a poet, not a scientist.

But one friend in particular is a scientist, and an argumentative one at that. This fictitious friend, called Lewis in the book, is closely modeled after Nathan's close friend, the distinguished ecologist Frank Pitelka. Lewis, in stark contrast to Leonard, sees birds through the eyes of a field ornithologist experienced in the

daily grind of research. Throughout his essay, the author relates various point/counterpoint discussions between the two of them, the poet and scientist, often over what makes Snow Buntings (or any other bird, for that matter) seem so special. Lewis can be a pain, asking such blunt questions as why Leonard doesn't just fly up to Alaska and see Snow Buntings; they're certainly common enough there. Why indeed? Nathan did, in fact, travel with a birding tour to Churchill, Manitoba, but succeeded only in glimpsing a Snow Bunting fly-by, staggeringly unsatisfactory. So why not go to Alaska, see plenty of Snow Buntings, and experience the epiphany? Even the author isn't sure. Perhaps he isn't ready for it yet; perhaps he wants the bird to come to him, not the other way around. One senses that the hoped-for epiphany is by no means a certainty.

I have often pondered how little we would know about ecology and evolution if birds had never evolved. They are such inspiring models, such marvelously congenial guides into the workings of the natural world. They command (or is it demand?) our attention and beg us to study them. Birds, after all, are the only group of vertebrates that is easy to observe. They are diverse, obvious, active, noisy creatures of the day, and colorful ones at that. And they are really fun to watch. I would venture a guess that even the most hard-core ornithologists began as birdwatchers. With birds, vocation derives from avocation. Birds, as models for the rest of nature, can be studied objectively, analyzed, interpreted, and understood, at least up to a point.

But there is also a unique esthetic quality to birds, perhaps the quality that first draws all of us to these remarkable masters of the air, a quality that Nathan celebrates. Nathan's prose, interspersed as it is with vignettes of poetry, presents birds mostly as objects of art and mystery rather than objects of study and understanding. They are the magnets of nature, attracting humans to them for reasons often difficult to articulate. In Nathan's mind, interpretation seems far less important than inspiration.

There is something deeply satisfying about this book. Ignore the silly title and realize that this is not merely the jottings of a southpaw birder anxious to share his life list. Rather, it is penned by a perceptive scholar who offers each of us a rare opportunity to think, as he thinks, about why birds make humans become birdwatchers. And why we are better for it.

And just one footnote. For some reason, as summer gave way to autumn, I just couldn't stop from going out each weekend in search of Snow Buntings. I found a lot of them this past fall, and each time I found them, I watched . . . and watched.

John Kricher is a frequent contributor to *Bird Observer*.