

BOOK REVIEW: *All the Birds of North America*

By Wayne R. Petersen

All the Birds of North America (American Bird Conservancy's Field Guide), by Jack L. Griggs. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc. 1997. 183 pages, extensively illustrated. \$19.95.

With an ever-expanding selection of bird field guides to choose from, the neophyte birder is no longer obliged to select from a field consisting of only two or three leading identification manuals. On the contrary, today's plethora of field guides is so great that the problem often facing the entry level birder is, "Which field guide should I buy?" Obviously, part of the answer lies in what appeals to the user. If innovative organizational features, icons, and high quality color illustrations (rather than photographs) appeal to the reader, then don't miss the American Bird Conservancy's (ABC) new North American field guide — "A revolutionary system based on feeding behaviors and field-recognizable features."

Another solid argument for selecting this guide is the cast of high profile ornithological consultants who assisted Jack Griggs in pulling the project together: Eirik Blom, Louis Bevier, Pete Dunne, Kimball Garrett, Kenn Kaufman, Paul Lehman, Larry McQueen, Nancy Newfield, Brian Patteson, Hans Peeters, and Thede Tobish. It doesn't get much better than this, folks! The combined expertise of this all-star cast is almost reason enough to drop \$20 on the book.

So what's new and what's not so new? First, a quick flip through the vinyl-bound pages of this back-pocket-shaped book shows some departures from the traditional taxonomic sequence with which many of us have grown accustomed. As examples, Sooty and Bridled tern, Black-legged Kittiwake, and all the skuas and jaegers appear within the first five pages of the book; swans and geese are separated from the rest of the waterfowl by loons and cormorants; hawks are followed by swifts and swallows; and cuckoos and thrashers appear on successive pages. Lest you've not picked up on the pattern, most of the birds in the book are grouped by either their feeding behaviors (e.g., aerialists, swimmers, wading birds, tree climbers, etc.) or habitats or, in the case of the passerine species, their bill shape. Arctic birds and Arctic rarities are placed in their own section at the end of the book. Likewise, a series of rather bizarre color photographs at the front of the book depicts mounts of seven extinct North American bird species set against a variety of artificial-looking backgrounds.

In addition to organizing species by feeding strategy, most of the color plates depict birds in realistic and colorful habitat settings, the majority of which are aesthetically appealing and ecologically accurate. For nearly every one of

the regularly occurring North American bird species, brief species accounts provide most of the standard field guide information: English and Latin names, length (and wingspread for some species) in inches, a few words of explanation about each species' abundance in North America, a summary plumage description, appropriate behavioral comments, phonetic descriptions of song and call notes, and a range map showing the range of the species in North America. Unfortunately, the brevity of the species accounts created by the spatial limitations imposed by the format of the book preclude the kind of detailed plumage descriptions that the increasingly sophisticated birding market seems to demand.

To identify an unfamiliar bird using the ABC field guide, the reader makes a selection from a series of icons and brief descriptions located inside the front and back covers, depending upon whether the bird is a waterbird or a landbird. Waterbird choices include "Pelagic Waterbirds," "Aerialists," "Swimmers," "Wading Birds," "Shorebirds," and "Upland Waterbirds." For landbirds the groupings are "Nocturnal," "Aerialists," "Ground-walkers," and "Tree-climbers." Perching landbirds are grouped by bill shape: "Flycatching," "Curved," "Straight," and "Conical." Once a tentative grouping has been selected from the choices provided on the end papers, a colored bar and number key directs the reader to the appropriate pages in the book. On the margins of each page of the text there are colored bars, small bird icons, and bird group names (e.g., "dark geese," "forest grouse," "drab vireos") that coincide with the reference keys inside the front and back covers. Having made an association from the choices above, the reader then matches the unfamiliar bird with one of the colored illustrations on the appropriate pages of the book.

An especially nice feature of the ABC field guide is the presence of expanded text pages that cover groups of birds in more detail than is afforded in the individual species accounts. These are generally informative, succinctly crafted, and technically excellent. Some (e.g., *Empidonax* flycatchers, sparrows) are accompanied by useful illustrations that accurately depict characteristics and comparisons that are conspicuously lacking in many other popular field guides. Perhaps the most disconcerting thing about certain of these essays is their placement within the text. For example, between pages 62-63 there are six unnumbered pages whose text includes discussions of feathers and bird flight, an explanation of how the book is organized, tips on birdwatching, and the basis for avian taxonomy. Since all are important topics, why are they buried in the middle of the book and not at the front? Similarly, why are a number of other equally interesting subjects integrated into other text in a way that makes finding and reading them almost serendipitous? To make matters worse, none of these essay topics are indexed anywhere in the book! A final point about the essays is the strong conservation theme that runs throughout. While perhaps not surprising considering that the project was sponsored by the American Bird

Conservancy, this conservation theme, particularly the way it is handled in the text, is one of the innovations that sets the ABC field guide apart from some of its chief competitors.

Ultimately, however, it is the color plates that usually seem to make or break a new field guide. In this regard, the ABC book does not disappoint. In fact, the brilliance and artistry of many of the paintings makes them arguably among the most attractive accurate of any to be found in a North American field guide. The cast of luminaries that collaborated to illustrate this book include some of the most accomplished bird painters working in the United States today: Jonathan Alderfer, Larry McQueen, Doug Pratt, and Barry Van Dusen, to name but a few. Especially pleasing examples of artistic excellence are Van Dusen's gulls and terns, Alderfer's waterfowl and shorebirds, Pratt's woodpeckers, and McQueen's warblers. If nothing else, this field guide provides the reader with a visual treat — a collection of bird paintings that has to be among the best compendiums of North American bird depictions currently available under one cover at an affordable price. Really a bargain!

Having offered this description of *All the Birds* as a field guide, would I recommend it? The answer, a qualified "Yes." As a field guide for someone with little experience in trying to identify birds in the field, some of the book's quirky organizational features make it less than satisfactory. Likewise, the brevity of most of the species accounts hardly makes the book "cutting edge." However, as a backup alternative to one or another of the more popular existing field guides (e.g., Peterson, Robbins, National Geographic, Stokes), I would buy the book in a minute. The illustrations alone make the guide a worthwhile addition to any birder's library, and the well-written essays and general species accounts have much to offer, even to experienced birders. Overall, I'm not convinced that the American Bird Conservancy has built a better mousetrap; however, they have definitely produced an attractive and innovative book that any birder would be well advised to add to his or her arsenal of tools. And for less than \$20, how can you go wrong?

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