

BOOK REVIEW: A Field Guide To Warblers Of North America

By Mark Lynch

A Field Guide To Warblers Of North America, by Jon L. Dunn and Kimball L. Garrett. Illustrated by Thomas R. Schultz and Cindy House. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1997. 656 pages, extensively illustrated.

I can remember a time in my callow youth when I actually thought that most field problems I would come up against could be answered by a single field guide. Of course I was naive. This was also the time when the details of migratory movements and subtleties of seasonal plumage variation were known only to a few seasoned veterans who had spent years in the field earning an intimate knowledge of the lives of birds. Today there is a veritable explosion of printed information on all aspects of birds' lives. Regional guides to every corner of the globe now compete for space on our bookshelves with identification guides to almost every group of birds imaginable. Consider the fact that there is now an entire "identification guide" to just the seven species of skuas and jaegers. This is in addition to an entire monograph on the group. It used to be we did not have enough time in the field to see the birds. Now we also don't have enough time to keep up with all the ornithological literature that is available.

In 1994, Houghton Mifflin was the American publisher of the British Book *Warblers of the Americas: An Identification Guide* by Curson, Quinn and Beadle. This beautiful volume illustrated all the warbler species of North, Central, and South America, as well as the Caribbean islands. The concise text covered plumage, behavior, and migration for all the species. Yet a mere three years later Houghton Mifflin has published an entirely new guide to the warblers of only North America as part of the Peterson Field Guide Series. Was there really a need for an entirely new book on this group of birds so soon? Most likely the reason was simply that a field guide by two of America's birding superstars, finally completed after years of anticipation, demanded to be published despite the recent British guide. Dunn and Garrett do pay their respects to Corson, Quinn, and Beadle, calling their book an "excellent guide."

A Field Guide to Warblers of North America is certainly packed with more detailed information. The layout is similar to other field guides, though the look is refreshingly different from *A Field Guide to Hawks of North America*, as well as all previous Peterson guides. The warbler guide does in fact represent a "new look" for the Peterson series, already used for other titles such as the guide to Eastern butterflies. There is an informative introductory chapter on the natural history of warblers, with general accounts of breeding biology and migratory patterns. This is followed by thirty-two plates, including two plates of undertail patterns. At first blush, these undertail plates may seem to be a boon to those of

us craning our necks to look up into the canopy, but I question how often we actually get good looks at the undertail patterns of the generally hyperactive warblers. It would seem that undertail patterns would be more useful for the bander than the birder.

The next section comprises the species accounts and forms the bulk of the book. Each account includes a thorough description of the plumage, an account of similar species, and sections on voice, behavior, habitat, distribution, conservation status, subspecies, taxonomic relationships, plumages and molts, and references. Although the plumage and range descriptions do not add substantially to the accounts in the "identification guide," there are numerous interesting details of behavior that make the new *Field Guide to Warblers* the definitive book on North American warblers. The color range maps are large and detailed but do not indicate wintering areas if these are not in North America. Also included in the species sections are good color photographs of each species, often of several different plumages.

Another reason for publishing yet another book on warblers so soon after the first is that this newer volume is considered by Houghton Mifflin to be a "field guide." Though field guide in size, and published in soft cover, *A Field Guide to Warblers* is too thick to slip easily into a back pocket. When I think "field guide," a concise text comes to mind. Frankly, the sheer amount of detailed information in this book makes it impractical for use as a "field guide" per se, but of more use as a home reference book or resource to keep in the car. A field guide also sinks or swims on the quality of its plates. The plates of *A Field Guide to Warblers* are very good, but I found them just a bit disappointing. Their style and execution breaks no new ground with previous Peterson field guide work, and the colors in a few plates seemed a bit chalky or washed out. The plates of *Warblers of the Americas* have better color and more lively looking birds. But this is a minor quibble. The text of *A Field Guide to Warblers* was so complete and authoritative that I expected something as extraordinary and innovative from the plates.

A Field Guide to Warblers of North America is an attractive, useful, and important volume. I would love to see similar volumes in this format on gulls and shorebirds of North America, though I doubt those would have the marketability of a book on warblers. The bad news for the overtaxed birder is that *Field Guide to Warblers of North America* is another "must have" volume for our ever-growing library of ornithology.

Mark Lynch is an instructor and ecological monitor at Broad Meadow Brook Massachusetts Audubon Sanctuary, as well as an instructor and docent at the Worcester Art Museum and host of the radio show "Inquiry" on WICN. One of the reasons that he recently had to move to a larger house is that he found himself actually covering up the windows of his old house with bookshelves.