

ABOUT BOOKS: Looking Back

(Bird Observer continues its series celebrating the books that have inspired, delighted, or enlightened our book reviewers.)

Looking Back

Paul M. Roberts

Reading earlier articles in this series has reminded me how diverse birders — and good birding books — are. I've read some of the books cited by previous authors, but generally those books did not have the same effect on me as on those writers, and I don't recall seeing many of my favorites on their lists.

When I began birding in my mid-to-late twenties, binoculars, scopes, and travel were not the big ticket items for most birders that they are today. Instead, books were, at least for me. I was fortunate in being drawn into birding during a very exciting surge of interest in the environment and birds, the early 1970s. The bird book market was just beginning to evolve, with the rapid growth of birding booksellers, clubs, and lists.

As a bibliophile whose ability to navigate around our apartment was severely circumscribed by hundreds of books on history and philosophy, I further limited my mobility by buying more birding books than my wife thought prudent. (She was right, of course.) I bought all the birding guides, but as a beginner I religiously used the "Golden Guide" by Robbins, Bruun, and Zim, with illustrations by Arthur Singer. Those plates were the most realistic, and having the range maps available on the same spread as the illustrations and descriptions was a real benefit. I cherished my original copy, but regrettably, subsequent revised editions did not do justice to the original plates.

A second field guide exercised my mind more than my eyes. The two-volume Audubon field guide by Richard Pough remains a mind-boggling achievement. The man who drew attention to the slaughter of raptors at Hawk Mountain wrote a field guide that focused more attention on the natural history and behavior of each species, so that you could better understand what the species *is*, not merely what it looks like. The plates by Don Eckleberry in the original printing are considered by some to be the best plates ever done for a field guide. You could not tell that by my reprint, but the prose was — is — rich in insight and detail. I remain in awe of the man and his achievement. A third book also close to my heart was *The Birds of Canada* by W. Earl Godfrey, with plates by John A. Crosby. Although not a field guide, it provided a special combination of up-to-date information on field identification, excellent plates, and good distribution maps. Before I left for a target bird trip, and when I got home after seeing something new or particularly well, I turned to Godfrey.

Friends will not be surprised that some of my most treasured books of the past are hawk-related, but several nonraptor books occupy a special place in my heart. *The Shorebirds of North America*, edited by Gardner Stout, with text by Peter Matthiessen,

excellent plates by Robert Clem, and state of the art species accounts by Ralph Palmer, is a true classic. I shall never forget the first time I read Matthiessen's captivating prose, particularly his description of Black-bellied Plovers calling in the fog on Long Island. He captures the essence of shorebirds and the ethos of migration unlike anyone else I've ever read. The day I first read that book on the shores of a small pond in Maine was the day I fell in love with shorebirds, with nary one in sight. (Of course, I was predisposed.) His prose was subsequently republished as *The Wind Birds*, and reprinted many times. Griscom and Sprunt's *The Warblers of America* is another classic. The prose is not as eloquent as Matthiessen's, but is rich with insights about behavior and song that I've found nowhere else. It taught me more about warblers than anything I've read before or since, and I would highly recommend it to anyone today.

Before I had been birding very long, I fell in love with hawks, experiencing a religious conversion in the midst of a Broad-winged Hawk flight over Mount Tom, the only place in Massachusetts where one could hope to see numbers of hawks, or so it was thought at the time. There were very few books on hawks available then, although the numbers began to grow respectable over the next decade. I shall always be grateful to Mary Louise Grossman and John Hamlet, who wrote *Birds of Prey of the World* (1964). It was out of print when I first heard of it, so I solicited every family member and close friend across the country to stop in every used bookstore and flea market to look for it. When finally found in San Diego, California, it proved to be a mother lode of information and photography, truly encyclopedic, with superb essays on birds of prey and their conservation, and the most extensive life histories (with black and white flight silhouettes) of hawks around the world. I still marvel at what Grossman and Hamlet accomplished.

The breadth of *Birds of Prey* was complemented by an obscure paper by Frank L. Beebe, *Field Studies of the Falconiformes of British Columbia*. This 163-page paper contained more information on the identification, behavior, and status of North American raptors than anything else available. Alden and Nancy Clayton gave me my first copy, which I shall always treasure. Knowing the Claytons and reading Beebe, I learned that at least several other people were as fascinated by hawks as I was. (It wasn't easy to find such people in 1974!)

Four other raptor books stand out from those early years. *Hawks, Owls and Wildlife*, by John and Frank Craighead, focused more on surveys of breeding and wintering raptors, including owls. First printed in 1956, Dover reprinted the volume in 1969, making it easily available and inexpensive. Anyone with an interest in raptors should read the descriptions of their extensive field research.

Those interested in hawk migration should read Donald S. Heintzelman's *Autumn Hawk Flights; The Migrations in Eastern North America*. Heintzelman is an amateur who didn't know he couldn't do what he did. He invested tremendous effort in researching and writing the first synthesis documenting what was known, and speculated about the migration of hawks in eastern North America. A quarter century later, no one has dared to write a sequel.

From the beginning of my birding life, I've been impressed with the quality of ornithological literature coming out of Britain, and out of publishers T. & A. D. Poyser

in particular. Two of my favorites, looking back, are from Poyser. Ian Newton is perhaps the world's preeminent student of raptors and clearly one of the most articulate. His groundbreaking *Population Ecology of Raptors* focuses on the social behavior of hawks, including their dispersion, numbers, movements, breeding, and mortality. Global in scope, it is tightly written and based on extensive and very thorough research. It truly unlocks the world of raptor behavior and the limits of their population growth. This is one of those books I reread every five years or so, because the more I know, the more I learn from it.

Flight Identification of European Raptors by Porter, Willis, Christensen, and Nielsen revolutionized bird and particularly hawk identification guides. This innovative effort used large black and white drawings of hawks as viewed from below and above, and flight photographs (black and white, of course) to help you identify hawks in flight as to age, sex, and morph, and confusing species. It seems so simple now, but they took a leap and elevated the bar for all field guides. I prayed that someone would do something like that for the hawks of my hemisphere, but it took another decade before Bill Clark and Brian Wheeler (*Hawks*, 1987) could answer those prayers!

Beginning early in my birding life, I rated each book by a very tough personal standard: If I were to be stranded on a deserted island for the rest of my life, and could have only five books with me, would this be one of them? Thomas Alerstam's *Bird Migration* would be on that island; it is, to my mind, one of the greatest bird books ever written. Originally done in Swedish and untranslated for almost a decade, Alerstam shows a command of migration research across the world, citing American research that is rarely referenced even in North American publications. If you are really interested in bird migration, Alerstam will transport you to a new, richer understanding of that phenomenon. If I could take only one book with me....

Last but not least is a humble effort by another great researcher and raptor authority, Joe Hickey. His *Guide to Bird Watching*, first published in 1943 and reprinted by Dover, is a brief, spirited introduction to bird study. Hickey focuses on what the lay person, the amateur, has contributed to and could yet add to our understanding of birds and their world. Sixty years later, this book is still an invaluable guide and an inspiration, and so much of what he has suggested amateurs could do remains as yet undone.

I was fortunate to have become a birder during an era in which publications in ornithology flourished. I am inspired by the efforts of amateur birders, such as Heintzelman, who invest considerable effort and take substantial risks to write and publish books that are highly unlikely to be profitable financially, and that many American academics fear to touch out of concern for manageable scope, peer review, tenure, and cost efficiency.

In the era of the Internet, I hope that birders will recognize the limitations of much of the wealth of information available on the web and appreciate the value of a substantive book that required a considerable intellectual and spiritual investment and that is reviewed by peers and well-edited before it is placed before them. This distilled knowledge and experience is a treasure and should not be forsaken. Of the books I've

described looking back, I would encourage any birder looking forward to read any or all of them. With the exception of the Porter, Willis, et al., which was a milestone in field identification, they have yet, in my opinion, to be surpassed. 🦅

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Paul M. Roberts bought the Golden Guide, a Peterson record of bird calls, and an expensive (\$35) pair of binoculars to learn that the spectacular bird he and his wife Julie were hearing and seeing while hiking in the Middlesex Fells was called a "Brown Thrasher." That bird, reinforced by multiple Rufous-sided Towhees, redirected their lives. Paul became an active birder and eventually developed a special interest in hawks. He founded the Eastern Mass Hawk Watch in 1976, served as Chair of the Hawk Migration Association of North America and Editor of *Bird Observer*, and is currently Chair of the NorthEast Hawk Watch. He lectures to bird clubs and teaches courses for several Massachusetts Audubon sanctuaries on hawks, shorebirds, and waterfowl. A resident of Medford, he pays for his most recently acquired bird books by working as Director of Communications for Analogic Corporation, one of the world's largest developers of medical imaging equipment.