

## Abridged Too Far . . . ?

*An objective evaluation of the new Peterson Field Guide*

KENN KAUFMAN

**A Field Guide to the Birds (Fourth Edition)** — Roger Tory Peterson. 1980. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company. 384 pp., 136 plates (most in color), line drawings, 390 range maps by Virginia Marie Peterson. \$15.00 hardbound, \$9.95 paperback.

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2 Park Street  
Boston, MA 02107

AFTER NEARLY FIFTY YEARS of influence, *A Field Guide to the Birds* is no longer a mere book; it is a phenomenon. Its author, Roger Tory Peterson, is a larger-than-life figure, the world's most honored naturalist. The appearance of the all-new 1980 edition of the Field Guide was more than a mere publishing event, it was a media event, the culmination of a wave of anticipation carefully nurtured by the publishers. To be appropriate, then, this book review must take into account more than just the book.

How can anyone criticize R. T. Peterson and his Field Guide? The man is incredibly talented: an artist, photographer, author, public speaker; a world traveler, a strong voice for conservation. His field guides have pointed out the way for hundreds of thousands of birdwatchers and wildlife enthusiasts (including this reviewer), bringing them their first inklings of environmental awareness, creating an army of concerned citizens who speak up in defense of birds and bird habitat. This effect has been so overwhelmingly beneficial that it is hardly worth mentioning the inaccuracies and incompleteness in earlier editions which led birders to misidentify some of the birds they saw.

The preceding statement is, I suppose, an underlying thesis of much of what follows. I have to admit that the new 1980 edition is simply beautiful. It presents all the diversity, beauty and excitement of birds in such an attractive and compact format that it is bound to create a new surge of interest in birding, bound to swell the ranks of those who would protect wildlife and habitat. I would like to see a copy of this book in every household in eastern North America. I would also like the reader to remember I said that, because from here on I am going to be saying some harsh and critical things about the new Peterson. My criticisms henceforth are made only from the viewpoint of a person who seriously wants to identify the birds he sees in the field.

From the appearance of the first edition in 1934, Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds* dominated the field virtually unchallenged for more than three decades. In 1966 its first serious rival appeared: *The Golden Guide, Birds of North America*, by Robbins, Bruun,

Zim and Singer. This new guide rapidly gained popularity (and a substantial portion of the market), primarily because of its very convenient format. However, most expert birders felt that *Birds of North America* represented a step backwards from the Peterson guides; they charged (correctly) that its illustrations were less accurate and its brief text was more limited.

Now the new Peterson is out. Compared to its own previous editions, it has a more convenient format — but the illustrations are less accurate and the text is more limited. Is this progress?

Granted, the author of a field guide suffers from two opposing pressures. The user of the guide (even the rank beginner) must be enabled to identify birds *quickly*, and this requires that things be kept compact and simple. The user should also be enabled to identify birds *accurately*, and this requires more detail, more discussion of complexities. Keeping these divergent goals in mind, the author must attain a middle ground between the ideals of convenience and completeness. The new Peterson achieves a massive advance in convenience for field use, but it is no improvement at all over previous editions in terms of leading to *correct identifications*.

The truly unfortunate thing is that it *could* have been a far better field identification guide *without* major changes in its convenient format . . . if only a plethora of errors had been edited out. If only a multitude of useful field marks had been written (and painted) in. If only the book reflected *current* knowledge of field identification, instead of being thirty years out of date for most species. If only the expert birders of North America had looked at the book before publication (instead of looking through it, groaning with disappointment and disbelief, *after* publication). What were the publishers (and the author) thinking of? A bird identification guide is by intention a scientific reference book; who would want to publish a work of reference without asking knowledgeable reviewers to check the accuracy of its contents?

I think it would be wrong to charge that the “go-it-alone” policy implicit in the new edition was due entirely to arrogance on Peterson’s part. It is quite possible he doesn’t realize that much has happened in the field (aside from the appearance of a rival guide) since the time of his previous edition. But in fact, remarkable advances have taken place. A number of observers, disturbed by the questionable accuracy of older sight records, have undertaken serious and intensive research into the fine points of field identification. They have debunked previously accepted field characters, discovered a host of new ones, unraveled the intricacies of the most complex groups. Their findings have been passed around by word of mouth at a hundred birding hot spots, published in a score of local newsletters and journals, taught to beginners in “bird classes” in a dozen cities. But Roger Tory Peterson — isolated at the pinnacle of the birding world, traveling the globe but rarely birding any more in North America — missed out. His new field guide reflects hardly a glimmer of the new sophistication in identification skills.

Open the 1980 edition at any page, and you step back into the past. Loons? Look at Common and Arctic loons (*Gavia immer*, *G. arctica*): you are told to distinguish them by relative thickness of the bill (a difficult thing to judge, and subject to variation); the diagnostic differences in face and neck patterns, which are easy to see and which instantly separate the two, are not shown. Cormorants? The obvious differences in flight silhouette between Olivaceous and Double-crested cormorants (*Phalacrocorax olivaceus*, *P. auritus*) are neither illustrated nor mentioned, and the difference in gular pouch shape is badly bungled. Ducks? No indication that Blue-winged and Cinnamon teal females (*Anas discors*, *A. cyanoptera*) might be distinguishable afield. Jaegers? No new information. Gulls? Thayer’s Gull *Larus thayeri* is evaded, not treated, with a head-only illustration of an adult and no mention of subadult stages; the first-winter Glaucous Gull *L. hyperboreus* is shown with a wildly atypical bill; and this time Peterson got the tail-pattern right for the immature Franklin’s Gull *L. pipixcan* but wrong on the immature Laughing Gull *L. atricilla*, perpetuating the confusion between these two species. Shorebirds?

Experts now agree that many shorebird species have three very distinct plumages (breeding, adult winter, and juvenal), but Peterson continues to illustrate only two, leaving the observer to puzzle out all those individuals that don't "look like the picture in the book" for obvious reasons. Flycatchers? The color plate of *Empidonax* might as well have been omitted, since the few differences it shows are not the real ones. Shrikes? The consistent differences between the two are obscured or confused. Waterthrushes? The outdated treatment will perpetuate confusion between Louisianas *Seiurus motacilla* and whitish Northern *S. noveboracensis*, since the diagnostic characters of the Louisiana are neither pictured nor described. Other warblers? Today's criteria for separating fall Blackpoll *Dendroica striata*, Bay-breasted *D. castanea*, and Pine *D. pinus* warblers go unmentioned; the observer relying on Peterson will inevitably misidentify some of these. Blackbirds? The treatment of Brewer's Blackbird *Euphagus cyanocephalus* is unlikely to alleviate confusion between it and Rusty Blackbird *E. carolinus*. Winter longspurs? The new guide continues to suggest that a white shoulder patch is indicative of Smith's Longspur *Calcarius pictus*, although Chestnut-collared Longspurs *C. ornatus* may show this as well; the distinctions between Chestnut-collared and McCown's *C. mccowni* are also blurred here.

And so on. These few examples (chosen from among many) are sufficient to prove my point: that Peterson seems generally unaware of recent developments in field identification, the discipline which is supposedly the primary subject of this book. Setting aside this fact, let us look at the components that make up a field guide. What about the illustrations, an all-important consideration in a bird identification book: isn't it good news that we have a brand new set of color plates of all the eastern birds? Well, yes and no.

My automatic first reaction, even before I had studied the plates, was to compare them mentally to those of the previous (1947) edition; how do they stack up? The new plates, with fewer individual birds per page, are much more detailed. Skillful use of light and shadow in most cases creates a more three-dimensional effect, adding realism. A visitor from another planet would certainly deem the new plates superior... even a visitor from another continent might agree, at least until the visitor had had a chance to look critically at our living birds, in the field. And then the disenchantment would set in. Peterson may have become more skillful at painting feathers, but it seems he has lost some of his ability at drawing birds.

Peterson must have been quite a fieldman in the 1940s; without frequent exposure to the birds, he could not have portrayed their *personalities* so well in the 1947 edition. Although there were a few drawings that didn't ring true, the majority captured the "gestalt," the undefinable impressions of the living bird. The slim thrushes looked shy and spooky, startled to be so starkly laid out on the page; the Ground Dove *Columbina passerina* took flight with a staccato burst of its short rounded wings; the Great Gray Owl *Strix nebulosa* looked down with stately detachment; the warblers seemed ready to dart away.

I wish I could say the same for the illustrations in the new edition. Unfortunately, while some species are depicted better in the new guide, many more are done worse, for a net loss. In the 1980 edition, the thrushes are positively *fat*: look at the rotund Veery *Catharus fuscescens* on p. 223. The shapes, especially head shapes, of all the large flycatchers on pages 195 and 197 are badly portrayed. Many of the warblers are curiously elongated: look at the female Canada Warbler *Wilsonia canadensis* on p. 235, or the long-bodied, short-tailed female Yellow Warbler *Dendroica petechia* on p. 239. Several of the owl portraits are embarrassingly awkward. The implication is that Roger has not gone out to take a close look at most of these birds for a long time.

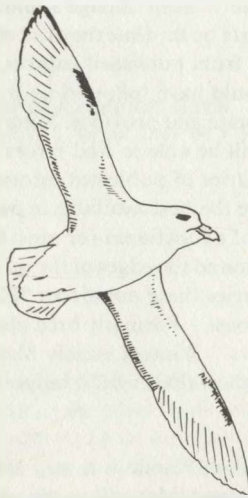
How important is this? Shape, of course, is not an integral element in "The Peterson System," which depends upon a few key details of pattern indicated by arrows. But once the birder has moved beyond the stage of having to laboriously check "field marks" on every individual seen, characteristic details of silhouette and posture will play an

increasingly important role in his sight identifications. Some obscurely marked immature Cape May Warblers *Dendroica tigrina* and Yellow-rumped Warblers *D. coronata*, for example, may be superficially very similar in pattern, but the experienced birder will never confuse them because the Cape May's short-tailed, small-headed look and finely pointed bill give it a completely different "gestalt." An expert scanning a mudflat, scoping a marsh or walking a field will instantly identify the majority of the standing shorebirds, swimming ducks or flushing sparrows by a mass of small impressions, of which the most important is silhouette. The diagnostic value of shapes cannot be denied. Although a field guide for beginners should not *emphasize* nuances in silhouette, it should at least *illustrate* them correctly so as to accelerate the beginner's learning process.

More disturbing is the poor treatment of shapes in those cases for which silhouette is not just a major factor in the "gestalt" but actually an important identifying character. The eagles and the *Buteo* hawks, for example, variable in plumage but diagnostic in silhouette, are much more distinctive in the field than they are in these field guide plates. The bill shape of the adult Little Blue Heron *Florida caerulea* is so badly drawn that it will increase, not solve, the problems beginners may have in distinguishing this species from Reddish Egret *Dichromanassa rufescens*. The characteristic shape and wing position of the Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis* make up its most useful "field mark," but observers will have to work that out for themselves, because Peterson's illustration makes the bird look like a bastardized gull.

I have mixed feelings about the six plates of "Accidentals." It was certainly an error in judgment to include tiny pictures of such confusing birds as Greater Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*, Great Snipe *Gallinago media*, and winter Mongolian Plover *Charadrius mongolus*, with *no* discussion of their field marks; no doubt this will lead to many dubious reports by overeager beginners. On the other hand, the active birder will appreciate having illustrations of such rare-but-regular birds as White-winged Black Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus* and Stripe-headed Tanager *Spindalis zena*.

The arrangement of the new guide has the text for each species on the page facing its illustration, a format similar to that which has proven so popular in the Golden Guide *Birds of North America*. A result has been to compress the text material for most species. Rarely is there enough space for detailed discussion of identification problems (although, as outlined earlier, lack of information was probably a stronger limiting factor than lack of space). One thing I like about the text is the way Peterson succeeds, even within severe



space restrictions, in making the descriptions lively and interesting. Thus, the Whistling Swan *Olor columbianus* is "often heard long before the ribbonlike flock can be spotted;" the Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* is "a gregarious, garrulous, short-tailed 'blackbird' with a meadowlark shape." These flashes of informality should make the book (and, by extension, birdwatching itself) more agreeable to beginners.

Experts will notice a few odd quirks in the text. The worst, perhaps, is on p. 300, a suggestion that Gray-rumped Swift *Chaetura cinereiventris* may be conspecific with Antillean Palm Swift *Tachornis phoenicobia*: Peterson must have had the latter confused with Lesser Antillean Swift *Chaetura martinica*, for which the statement would have been more reasonable. A list of "Accidentals from the West" on p. 304 is badly flawed, and should have been reviewed by authorities from each state and province. A brief perusal is enough to reveal omissions from this list: Zone-tailed Hawk *Buteo albonotatus* from Nova Scotia, Rufous-necked Stint *Calidris ruficollis* from Ohio, Sage Thrasher *Oreoscoptes montanus* from Maryland, etc. Relegating Bronzed Cowbird *Molothrus aeneus* to this list was clearly wrong; the species has occurred so often in the Gulf states and Florida as to merit full treatment in the main body of the book.

Although the rearrangement of plates and text does give the new guide an appearance quite different from that of previous editions, the single greatest change is the use of range maps to delineate species distributions. Inclusion of the maps will inevitably bring to mind comparisons to the competing Golden Guide, *Birds of North America* (but the reader should recall that Peterson first used range maps in his *Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe* twelve years before the Golden Guide appeared). Positioning of the maps in the Golden Guide was dictated by the user's convenience: for quickest possible reference the maps were placed adjacent to the text on the page facing the illustration, thus reducing the size of both map and text to the barest minimum. However, Peterson opted (wisely, in my opinion) for completeness over convenience: the text facing the illustrations includes one-line range descriptions, but the maps themselves are placed in a separate section and done at large scale (only six to the page), allowing for much detail. The new Mrs. Peterson, Virginia Marie, helped with the research and then drew all the maps, producing a series that is very attractive.

The maps are not as accurate or up-to-date as they could have been. You may easily confirm this fact for yourself, and without even looking at the maps: simply turn to the Introduction, to pages 8-9, where Peterson shamelessly admits that the maps were compiled from published sources only. Obviously this was not the best way to do it. Bird distribution and our knowledge of it both change rapidly enough that books on the subject tend to be slightly out of date by the time they roll off the press, and much more so after five or ten years. Compiling from published sources, obviously, was only half the ideal approach: the Petersons should have followed up by circulating their preliminary maps to experts in every relevant state and province. Since they failed to do so, of course, every locality birder in the East will be able to find errors in the maps. But as far as the range maps go — as rough summaries of published information on bird distribution in eastern North America — they are the best available in portable form, and despite their deficiencies they will be useful and educational for most birders. A feature I like is the inclusion of editorial comments around the edges of the maps. The map for the Dickcissel *Spiza americana*, for example, carries these notations: "Fluctuates at e. edge of range / Sparse fall migrant on Atlantic Coast / Formerly bred along seaboard; Mass. to S. C. / Winters rarely in e. U.S. at feeders / Winters mainly Mexico to n. S. America." These notes convey much more information than would be possible with mere symbols.

IN SUMMARY, then, the new Field Guide is a very attractive book, and it contains enough information that every eastern birder will surely want a copy. However, it is a far cry from the accurate, reliable book it could have been. Its major flaw is its excessive

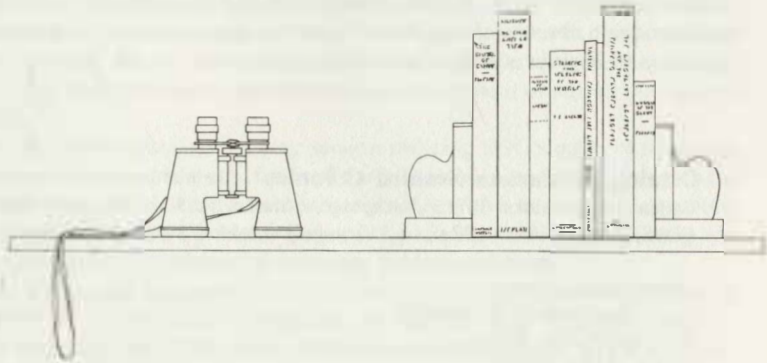
number of large and small errors scattered throughout the plates, text, and maps; the presence of these errors reflects a major flaw in the production process, i.e. the lack of a thorough review & revision by experts in the field. If further editions of this or other guides in the series are contemplated, hopefully either good sense or his publishers will prevail upon Peterson to seek the aid of more knowledgeable observers. R.T.P. should not feel self-conscious about doing so: after all, paradoxically, his field guides have been instrumental in creating a generation of experts who have moved "beyond the field guide stage of birding."

For the time being, the North American observer is still without a reliable bird guide. The recommended solution, if you want a book to carry afield, is to take both the appropriate regional Peterson Field Guide and the Golden Guide, *Birds of North America* . . . and take both with a large grain of salt. Use a liberal hand in writing additions and corrections into the margins; take every opportunity to learn new points from other birders, from your own experience, and from articles in *Continental Birdlife* and elsewhere. Keep your fingers crossed in hopes that an "advanced field guide" may yet be forthcoming from some source. And if you should meet Roger Tory Peterson, do not criticize his latest Field Guide; just ask him to autograph your copy, and thank him for having done so much to promote bird study all over the world.

## Reviews

Edited by

ELAINE COOK



**A Guide to the Behavior of Common Birds** — Donald W. Stokes. 1979. Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown & Co. 346 pp., illus. by J. Fenwick Lansdowne, bibliog., index. \$9.95.

Publisher's address:  
Little, Brown & Co.  
34 Beacon St.  
Boston, MA 02107

ALTHOUGH we are routinely called "birdwatchers," it seems most birders spend regrettably little time *watching* to see what birds are actually doing. This *Guide to the Behavior of Common Birds*, with its focus on a few easily-observed species, could bring about a healthy change in this aspect of birder behavior.

Twenty-five common species are discussed in detail. Although all of the included birds are of wide distribution (and all areas of North America will harbor some of them)