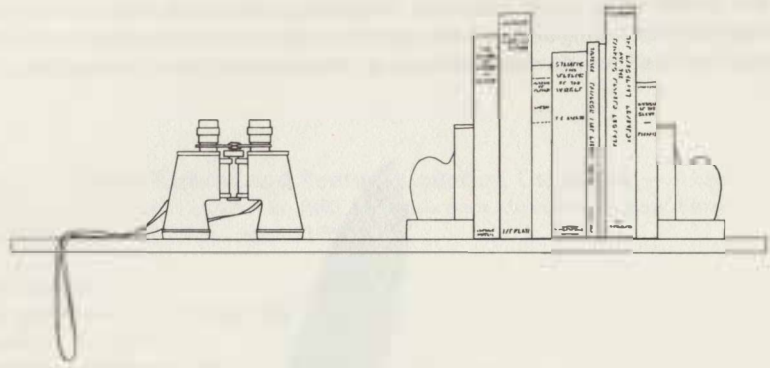


Reviews

Edited by

ELAINE COOK



Call Collect, Ask for Birdman — James M. Vardaman. 1980. New York, New York: St. Martin's Press. 247 pp., photos, map. \$10.95.

Publisher's address:
St. Martin's Press
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10010

An interest in birds can be almost anything the observer wants it to be — a science, a sport, a passion, a skill, a lark. For many it is a combination of some or all of these elements. For Jim Vardaman in 1979 it was a sport and ultimately a race. The listing game drove this otherwise likeable and uncomplicated man to the outer limits of birding mania in an attempt to see 700 species of birds in North America in just one year. He was armed with good advice, competent guides, ample energy and a healthy expense account. Vardaman spent 159 days and \$44,507.35 and traveled over 161,000 miles pursuing this elusive goal.

This book is no *Wild America*, no journal full of commentaries on the natural history and birdlife of North America. Inevitable comparisons with that work, which took Peterson and Fisher in 1953 through 100 days and 30,000 miles of natural delights and which undoubtedly launched the "Big Year" competition, are unnecessary. Vardaman intends this book to be a recounting of a *lister's* Odyssey. His accomplishment is not one as a naturalist, but as an organizer, a talent amply demonstrated in the book and clearly acquired in his forestry management business. Skill as an organizer meant arranging for complicated schedules and being at the right place at the right time to try to see 700 species.

In the beginning, however, the book seems too rushed. Chapter three finds Vardaman shuttling quickly through four Western states — Oklahoma, Texas, Colorado and California. During this eight-day dash the reader gets little feel for the birds or the

places visited, only the list. There is a sense of "This is Thursday, we must be in the Rockies" about this part of the book.

Vardaman subsequently brings us through the Atlantic Provinces, Arizona, Florida, Alaska, Wyoming and elsewhere in a less hurried fashion. Many of his little adventures are quite entertaining and it is interesting to follow his luck — both good and bad — as the story progresses. Chapters 12, 13, 14 and 19, describing the search for birds on Attu, St. Lawrence Island and other Alaskan outposts unfamiliar to many observers, are among the more informative in the book. Yet, as we go through Vardaman's narrative there occurs little or no preparation for some of the rare birds seen in 1979 (e.g. Skylark *Alauda arvensis*, p. 24 or Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*, p. 25) and there is no discussion of the factors which might contribute to their appearance. Similarly, many less rare, but still quite interesting birds are simply mentioned in the text without any further comment (e.g. Mexican Crow *Corvus imparatus*, p. 34 or Cave Swallow *Petrochelidon fulva*, p. 58).



While the importance of the list overshadows every other theme in the book, it might be interesting to note here that there were some byproducts of Vardaman's year that were of a more serious nature. For example, it was found that Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella ochotensis* may actually be regular on the outer Aleutians in the fall and that White-collared Seedeater *Sporophila torqueola*, though certainly down from former numbers, is still to be found in the Rio Grande Valley. We probably would not know this except for Vardaman's effort and the efforts of those helping him.

The most interesting part of the book is, perhaps, appendix A, in which 811 species are charted under fifteen key areas and each is given a coded rating, marking the likelihood of occurrence. The numbered codes range from #1, signifying the best likelihood of discovery, upwards to #7 which approaches the almost mythical. The system is ingenious and quite helpful. One could have some disagreement with the charts as they stand, however. White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus* is not charted under the North Carolina pelagic category, nor is Scarlet-headed (Streak-backed) Oriole *Icterus sclateri* charted under California. Why Ross' Gull *Rhodostethia rosea* is given a #1 code rating, while the Great Gray Owl *Strix nebulosa*, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl *Glaucidium brasilianum* and both the skuas *Catharacta* are listed as #2, escapes me. Still, these charts are quite well done.

Except for a short discussion on the speciation of orioles, some comments on a leucistic Black-capped Chickadee *Parus atricapillus* originally identified as a Siberian

(Gray-headed) Chickadee *P. cinctus*, and some notes on the Spot-billed Duck *Anas poecilorhyncha* and on the problems of differentiating Magnificent and Great frigatebirds *Fregata magnificens*, *F. minor* (these last notes written by observers other than the author), there is little you can sink your teeth into in the way of bird identification in the text. This is probably because much of Vardaman's story is about the *people* who watch birds, rather than the birds themselves. It is no accident that the reader gets more of a feeling for some of the intrepid bird enthusiasts who appear through the text than for any of the birds themselves. Indeed, all the 13 photographs are of birders, not birds. (To see a photograph of a score of people observing Brown Noddies *Anous stolidus* on the Dry Tortugas when you are informed that they observed a Black Noddy *A. tenuirostris* among the Browns can be downright annoying.)

Still, if you want to partake in a little vicarious listing or look into the syndrome which makes birders tick, you could hardly do better than this book. — *Paul J. Baicich*

The Birds of Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties, California — Richard Webster, Paul Lehman, and Louis Bevier. 1980. (*Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, Occasional Paper, No. 10*) 43 pp., map. \$3.75.

Publisher's address:
Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History
2559 Puesta del Sol Road
Santa Barbara, California 93105

EVEN the California birders, who are so accustomed to the unusual that they expect it on every trip afield, have been impressed by the steady onslaught of rare birds reported from the Santa Barbara region in recent years. One factor in this stream of discoveries has been the quality of the area itself: something about the local vagrant traps not only attracts the lost strays but also, apparently, encourages them to remain for extended periods. However, an equally important factor has been the intensive, concentrated coverage which the area has received during the last decade from a band of talented young field ornithologists. Three of the leaders of this movement have now pooled their knowledge to produce an accurate, up-to-date reference work on the birds of the region.

The format is a familiar and very effective one featuring bar-graphs to indicate seasonal occurrence and relative abundance, number/letter codes for district and habitat, and facing-page notes giving further information. For the rarest vagrants, the latter notes list dates & places of all records. Commendably, however, the authors have also paid attention to the more common species, and interesting notes on their distribution are often included.

Needless to say, this attractively-produced work will be essential for anyone who birds in or near Santa Barbara and Ventura counties. It will also be an invaluable source of information for anyone interested in the details of western bird distribution, migration or patterns of vagrancy. — *K.K.*