



Books For Banders

"SOMETHING OLD AND SOMETHING NEW"

Edited By Mabel Gillespie



Inside the cover of my bird guide I once pasted a sheet of paper which contained various lists. There was one list of birds with eye rings and another list of birds with wing bars, and so on. Then if I spotted in the field a "confusing fall warbler" with certain characteristics I could more quickly come to a conclusion as to its identity than if I had to look over the entire warbler list.

Evidently I missed cashing in on a good thing, since in 1963 Lou Blanchly and Randolph Jenks had a book published by Knopf entitled "Naming the Birds at a Glance", with guide drawings by Sheridan Oman. In this book they enlarged my idea of making lists of noticeable colors and markings in order to facilitate quick identifications. In the introduction the authors claim that scientific classification, "which is based to a great extent upon the birds' anatomy and skeletal structure - the birds' insides - appeared to be the greatest stumbling block to bird identification in the field, where only the outsides are visible." Therefore, in this guide a wholly new principle for grouping has been adopted. It is "a new system which teaches you how to identify any unfamiliar bird by using whatever you notice at first sight." It covers "the eastern land birds from South Carolina west to the Rocky Mountains and north to the Arctic".

The principle suggests that used in the recent publication "A Field Guide to Wildflowers" by Roger Tory Peterson and Margaret McKenny. In this book the flowers are grouped by color and under color are sub-headings such as "5 petals, 3 leaflets or 3-part leaves", "5 petals, various leaves" and so forth. Norman Taylor in "A Guide to the Wild Flowers" used this system to a lesser extent in the book published in 1928 which I found invaluable. The illustrations in the latter were only black and white sketches, while those in the recent book in the Peterson series, done by Peterson himself, have a fair number in color. It is a very fine guide and I recommend it highly even though it has nothing to do with birds or banding.

Returning to the book under consideration, the authors seized on all sorts of field marks under which they classify species. As they claim in the introduction, "Most people are not able to classify a bird - that is, a finch, sparrow, warbler, etc. - when they catch that first look at an unfamiliar specimen. Rather, they see a 'small brownish bird' or a 'mostly blue bird' whose other distinguishing characteristics they have forgotten by the time they have thumbed through their field book. This

book offers instantly an array of patterns and color characteristics, available at a flip of the finger to either end paper.

"Listed there, in easily usable form, are not technical classifications, but rather a key to the obvious markings ('black cap' or 'white rump' or 'yellow crown') which the user has seen but will not retain beyond that first moment. There, on either end paper, handily organized under overall categories, the user will find those additional markings which will refer him to the page of picture and description of that particular bird. These marking notations will guide the user to his bird no matter which one of several characteristics he may have noticed first!"

In the middle of the book are several pages, colored blue and thus readily found, which continue and elaborate the keys on the end papers. While this book is aimed at assisting the beginner, I'm sure there are old-timers who may find it useful at times.

The illustrations are called guide drawings. Under this system of identification you don't need color; and anyway, the field guides give you that. Emphasis is placed on "banner marks", and there is a clever and original scheme to denote size.

The large birds such as hawks and owls have a special section. The authors say, however, "do not be disturbed if you remain uncertain as to the identity of some hawks you see. The most experienced bird students have the same difficulty."

(Indeed they do, but such birds are identified in perhaps the majority of instances, by experienced observers, by shape, manner of flight and certain proportions. We have not seen this book - though we are now most interested in acquiring a copy - but from Mrs. Gillespie's description are inclined to think it would be most helpful indeed for beginners at identifying birds. However, the scientific classification - affectionately known as A.O.U. order - is ornithology's best attempt at a natural, evolutionary classification and it is to this order that virtually all publications on birds, whether scientific or popular, are oriented. There is an excellent book on the birds of Australia, "What Bird Is That?" by Neville Cayley, in which birds are classified by habitat - most bewildering to anyone brought up to the "A.O.U. order". While an experienced observer will spot a bird which is gray, has a long tail and white patches and say "Mockingbird" without hesitation - and without classifying it mentally to order, family and genus - the beginner will do so only when he is acquainted with its basic markings; and herein lies the value of this book, provided that our beginner does not call this bird a Shrike. To EBBA readers, most of whom are also oriented to A.O.U. order, we suggest that on giving this book or recommending it to a beginning birder, add a copy of Robbins' "Birds of North America" or Peterson's Field Guide to complement it. -Ed.)

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In 1961 Dover published in paperback an unabridged and unaltered republication of "American Wildlife and Plants" subtitled "A Guide to Wildlife Food Habits". This was first published by McGraw-Hill Book Company in 1951 and written by Alexander Martin, Herbert S. Zim and Arnold L. Nelson. The preface states that "the volume is divided into three main units. Part I is introductory. It aims to provide orientation and interpretation and its final chapter explains the symbols and other devices used in Parts II and III.

"Part II treats the wildlife of the country group by group and gives data on their foods (particularly plant parts), ranges, habits and economics. Since the term 'wildlife' as used in this book has the generally accepted connotation of birds and mammals, only a small space at the end of Part II is reserved for the cold-blooded vertebrates (fish, reptiles and amphibians). Direct use of plants by these latter groups is limited and has received comparatively little study.

"Part III turns the focus on plants. It denotes the value of different genera of trees, shrubs, weeds, aquatics, and cultivated crops to various kinds of wildlife in different parts of the country. The final chapter of Part III presents a classified ranking of wildlife plants - tentative ratings which may alter as food-habits information grows."

The illustrations, from various sources, are very nice black and white drawings. There is a profuse use of maps to show ranges both of bird and plant species. There are diagrams to show, "at a glance, the seasonal changes in the proportions of plant and animal foods eaten". In using common names of birds "the possessive apostrophe and s have been deleted from all names. Thus Gambel's Quail becomes Gambel Quail, Audubon's Warbler becomes Audubon Warbler, etc. This policy, for which there is growing support, prevails generally in the common names of mammals".

It is interesting to note the plants used as food for various species of birds. The hummingbird, for instance, partakes of 33 species of cultivated plants, and 14 species of wild plants with jewelweed heading the list as most attractive. These native plants are listed for the "east and prairies", and there are other lists of wild plants for the southwest and for the Pacific.

A surprising number of birds eat poison ivy berries, though maybe it isn't so surprising when you consider how prevalent the plant is. And think how the plant is thus seeded elsewhere with so many birds to scatter the seeds. Pokeweed is another plant whose berries are tempting to a large number of birds. It is even deliberately planted in some cases in order to tempt birds. Personally I have spent too much time and effort in excavating the tenacious root systems of this species to want to give it much encouragement. I would rather cut the young shoots in spring to cook for greens.

All in all, nevertheless, this is a very handy reference book. If, for instance, you wish to encourage Flickers so that they will feast on your unwanted ants and beetles, you can, omitting poison ivy which rates high on the list, plant other berry-bearing trees and shrubs, all of which are listed.

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In the course of reading "Abominable Snowmen" by Ivan T. Sanderson, the text of which is concerned with other than avian interests, a reason advanced to explain why these hypothetical creatures climb high in the Himalaya Mountains is that they seek lichens growing at high altitudes which are packed with vitamins. The author goes on to suggest that the reason many birds migrate to far northern regions to nest is that the insect life they feed on is full of vitamins because the insects they have eaten have fed on vitamin-packed lichens and tundra plants. Has anyone encountered such a theory, and if so would such person care to comment on it or quote authorities?

(This book, published by Chilton Book Co. in 1961 and still in print, and written by the author of many wildlife books, gives a most plausible discussion of these unfortunately-named creatures not only in the Himalayas but elsewhere including northwestern North America. While utterly unrelated to birds or banding, we venture to recommend it as most interesting reading. For those who may be interested, look at the April-May 1968 issue of National Wildlife, the excellent magazine of the National Wildlife Association, which contains an article with photographs of such a creature said to have been taken in extreme northern California! -Ed.)

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