

REVIEWS

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Stokes Field Guide to the Birds: Eastern Region.—Donald and Lillian Stokes, 1996. Little, Brown and Company, Boston. 471 pages, \$16.95, ISBN 0-316-81809-7. Numerous field identification guides are available to birders. Perhaps most popular are the following: Roger Tory Peterson's *A Field Guide to the Birds East of the Rockies*, the National Geographic Society's *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, Shirley L. Scott, Editor, and *The Birds of North America*, by Robbins, Bruun, and Zim. Donald and Lillian Stokes, authors of several nature guides, have just added another choice. This eye-catching book is illustrated with photographs rather than paintings of birds. The photographs and a number of other features the Stokes' employ may lure some new birders away from the traditional favorites. However, this flashy format has some limitations.

As the authors make clear, this guide was written with the beginner in mind. The colorful photographs and the organization and style of the text are perhaps initially more attractive to new birders than are the more traditional illustrations of other guides. The authors' stated goal is to promote "three-dimensional birding": identification as well as some understanding of the basic behavior and conservation of the species. Their intentions are admirable and important. As anthropogenic pressures on wildlife increase and as valuable wildlife habitat decreases, an educated and aware birding public is essential.

Several features are included to aid the birder in the basics of identification: To facilitate quick location of species' descriptions, a quick alphabetical index is repeated on the insides of both front and back covers. This index uses generic terms such as "doves" and "owls" to lead readers to related groups of birds. It also uses taxonomic nomenclature such as "Empidonax" and "Buteo" for quick reference. On the page facing each of these indices appears a color tab index to the most common birds, organized loosely around avian families. For example, Shorebirds (with the subheadings "Plovers, Stilt, Avocet, Sandpipers, Dowitchers, Phalaropes"), has a small square of gold on the leading edge of the page. This can be followed down the outside of the book to a gold tab on the edge of the pages corresponding with the text on shorebirds so that the observer can turn quickly to the correct section for the birds he or she is watching. Another feature is a section of photographs of over 50 common backyard birds, such as American Goldfinch, House Finch, and Song Sparrow, to name but a few. Each photograph is accompanied by a page number so that the reader can quickly find the appropriate text. There are also "Learning Pages" dealing with identification problems of hawks in flight, shorebirds, gulls, flycatchers, warblers, and sparrows, again with photographs of commonly seen species or groups and page references for related text. The Learning Page for gulls may be quite helpful to beginners trying to decipher the subtle plumage patterns among gulls. The pages for sparrows help differentiate some common sparrows from some equally common but similar finches that may confuse novices. The flycatcher Learning Pages are less successful. While written descriptions assist the observer in making distinctions between such groups as phoebes, peewees, and kingbirds, the accompanying photographs don't demonstrate those differences clearly. All of these innovations certainly help beginners locate birds in the text and differentiate broad bird groups from one another but they are not particularly useful for distinguishing one species from another within those groups. How much time have most of us spent studying the "confusing fall warblers" page in Peterson or the Empids shown with four or five species on a page? That kind of comparison is difficult in the Stokes' book, and the Learning Pages don't solve the problem.

The authors devote a page to each species account or in a few cases have placed two closely related species on the same page. Each page usually includes one or more photographs of the species with text addressing identification, feeding, nesting, and behavior.

The information conveyed is clear and complete. The photographs, however, raise an old field guide debate: Which are best, photographs or artists' illustrations? In this guide, a number of the photographs are misleading or simply do not show enough of the bird to give a complete picture. An artist controls the posture and position of the bird, leading to uniformity by controlling exactly how each appears on the page. Photographs catch an individual bird at a single moment, perhaps with feathers ruffled or at an odd angle. An artist can emphasize key colors and field marks and use these to differentiate confusingly similar species. Some of the photographs in the Stokes guide are quite successful, for example, the stunning colors of a male Mallard's head, or a Prothonotary Warbler and the facial patterns of some of the sparrows. Other photographs were nicely shown, while depictions of some flycatchers and hawks were less successful and in some cases misleading.

Additional information provided on the species' pages includes range maps and brief notes on habitat, voice, and conservation. The conservation portion of each account depicts species trends as indicated by data gathered primarily from Breeding Bird Surveys and Christmas Bird Counts. As the authors point out in their opening comments, this information has been gathered from broad studies, and caution is required in interpreting the results. While all of this may be confusing to the beginner, it may engage the interest of some to investigate birding activities in their communities. Just the awareness that birders do more than "watch" can be valuable.

The convenience of the quick reference features in guiding beginners to the correct groups or species pages cannot be denied; however, there's something to be learned each time someone thumbs through a "traditional" guide to identify (Eureka!) that stranger splashing around in the birdbath. The book is lacking in detailed taxonomic information; while it gives the species' scientific names, it avoids order and family names or any definitions of them. Some discussion of migration and migration routes would have been helpful as well.

The traditional favorite field guides named at the start of this review won't be supplanted by this newcomer, especially with experienced birders. Still, it is an attractive and helpful guide for the beginner and would be a good addition to public library collections. According to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service survey quoted in *National Wildlife* (December/January 1996), 65 million adults enjoy watching and feeding birds in the United States. Any book that adds information and enjoyment to that experience has to be considered a welcome newcomer, and the Stokes guide certainly qualifies.—**Linda Douglas**, 3675 1st Avenue NW, Naples, Florida 34120.