

REVIEW

Florida Field Naturalist 27(4):180-181, 1999.

New World Blackbirds.—Alvaro Jaramillo and Peter Burke. 1999. *New World Blackbirds—the Icterids*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. 431 pages. \$49.50. ISBN 0-691-00680-6.—Members of the New World family Icteridae occupy a great diversity of habitats over a wide geographic range. They have evolved an extraordinary array of mating strategies and plumage. This book treats 106 species, of which about 20 have been recorded in Florida. Most of the other 86 are found only south of Florida. Considering the large degree of intraspecific plumage variation that occurs in the Icteridae, the authors provide very thorough descriptions of the plumage of the various age and sex categories of each species. These details alone make the book a valuable aid for museum workers, bird banders, or for others who study plumage.

Because they are visually and vocally conspicuous and usually live in open country, the blackbirds, particularly the marsh species (*Agelaius* and *Xanthocephalus*), and the grackles (*Quiscalus*), have been the focus of much behavioral research. The meat of the book is in its detailed treatment of the natural history of each species. Bird books have evolved beyond the field guide stage. The market has now reached the point where readers will buy detailed accounts of specific taxonomic groups. Recent examples are books on warblers (Curson, J., D. Quinn, and D. Beadle. 1994. *Warblers of the Americas*. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston.) and sparrows (Rising, J. D., and D. D. Beadle. 1996. *The sparrows of the United States and Canada*. Harcourt Brace and Co., San Diego). This book goes far beyond either of these works in providing detailed information. Most of the blackbird species accounts are three or more pages of fine type. The bibliography is over 30 pages, has about 1200 references, and the authors have included references from Latin American publications. Access to such extensive data serves a function in the development of our knowledge: by summarizing what is known, and by bringing it all together in one place, the book stimulates readers to evaluate what they see within in an evolutionary framework. As we local naturalists become peripatetic, it is possible for us to think comparatively about natural history of related species that may exist in distant places and widely divergent habitats.

Examples of other recent books on the Icteridae are “Blackbirds of the Americas” (Orians, G. H. 1985. University of Washington Press. Seattle) and “Orioles, Blackbirds, and their Kin” (Skutch, A. K. 1996. University of Arizona Press. Tucson.). These are recommended collateral reading for anyone who reads the present book, and gets hooked on blackbirds. These books also illustrate how the behavior and diversity of the blackbirds have influenced the work of two leading naturalists.

And now for the quibbling. Most of the species accounts are up to date. I was dismayed, however, that the most recent research on the Boat-tailed Grackle, although cited in the references, was not discussed in the text. This work includes the Florida research of Tom Bancroft, much of which was published in this journal (Bancroft, G. T. 1987. Mating system and nesting phenology of the Boat-tailed Grackle in central Florida. *Florida Field Naturalist* 15:1-18). The authors give a 1937 publication as the main source for this species, although at least 10 major papers have been published since then. The Boat-tailed Grackle, like the Montezuma Oropendola, has a mating system known as harem polygyny, in which male mating success is related to position in a dominance hierarchy. The discovery of this behavior in Boat-tailed Grackles (Post, W. 1992. Dominance and mating success in male Boat-tailed Grackles. *Animal Behavior* 44:917-929) preceded its finding in oropendolas.

Peter Burke's 39 color plates and numerous line drawings are beautifully rendered. Each plate is faced by a distributional map and a synopsis of diagnostic plumage fea-

tures. The plates often show the subjects in alert postures, in which they appear to be preparing to take off; this is reasonable, as that is the way we usually see them. However, in future editions, the artist may wish to portray some of the more unusual displays for some of the better known species. In this edition, he has accomplished this beautifully with the Scrub Blackbird (Plate 32), and for many of the oropendolas and caciques (Plates 1-8). The drawings of flight patterns are also unique, and very nice. Burke's paintings reflect the empathy he felt with his subjects.

At the very reasonable price, I highly recommend *New World Blackbirds*, if only for the excellent plates. This book is an essential reference for all ornithologists, particularly those interested in behavior and evolutionary biology. It also should be obtained by college and community libraries.—**William Post**, Charleston Museum, 360 Meeting Street, Charleston, South Carolina 29403.