

## IDENTIFICATION GUIDE TO NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS PART II—ANATIDAE TO ALCIDAE

Pyle, P. 2008. Point Reyes Station, CA: Slate Creek Press. xi + 835 pp. Soft cover. ISBN-13: 9780961894047. US\$62.

It seems a safe bet that, in virtually every songbird banding station in North America, one would find a dog-eared copy of Part I of Peter Pyle's series, a testament to its high quality and lasting utility. Part I, published in revised and expanded form in 1997, covered the passerines and near-passerines (doves through woodpeckers, 395 species). In explaining why it took him four years to start Part II after completing Part I, the author stated that "the sheer magnitude of the task at hand promoted substantial procrastination." Even just a quick glance at this book, a wealth of detailed technical information on every one of its 800-plus pages (which cover 310 species), and his reluctance is easy to understand. But for anyone who studies birds, and especially for North American ornithologists who work with birds in the hand, it is very fortunate that he persisted.

Part II will probably have a smaller audience than Part I simply because fewer people put bands on birds other than songbirds. Nonetheless, this book will undoubtedly be an invaluable resource for those who study and band waterfowl, game birds, shorebirds, waterbirds and seabirds. And already I have seen the work cited in the scientific literature for purposes other than as a guide to identifying, ageing and sexing birds in the hand. For example, with the burgeoning use of feathers as time-and-place records in hormonal and stable isotope analyses, the species-specific information on moult sequences is potentially very useful to researchers designing field protocols to sample these birds.

The layout of Part II closely follows that of Part I, and there is considerable overlap in content. But it is clear that the depth of knowledge on moult and other facets of avian biology has increased considerably in the decade since Part I was published, and the new information has been diligently incorporated. I found that, although similar in layout and style, Part II is better in presentation than is Part I—for example, in the quality of the figures.

The book begins with introductory sections that cover bird topography; techniques for the identification, ageing and sexing of birds (including an assessment of measurement techniques and a plea for standardization); moults and plumages, plus breeding and cloacal characters; hybrids; geographic variation; and directions for using the guide. These sections are highly technical and greatly detailed, and so will not engage the casual reader. But there is some interesting reading here: For example, I was intrigued to learn about the four evolutionary moult strategies in birds (Howell *et al.* 2003). As anyone who has used these books with birds in hand knows, a rote-like knowledge of the material in these sections, including the technical jargon and acronyms, is important. If you are going to be using this book, do your homework ahead of time.

The introductory chapters are followed by the species accounts. Pyle asks other researchers to critique the content and provide new information as it becomes available, and to this end, I asked my colleagues Rob Butler (Bird Studies Canada) and Dan Esler (Simon Fraser University) to evaluate the accounts for Great Blue Heron *Ardea herodias* and Western Sandpiper *Calidris mauri* (Butler) and Surf Scoter *Melanitta perspicillata*, White-winged

Scoter *M. deglandi (fusca)* and Black Scoter *M. nigra* (Esler). Both thought that the species accounts were excellent. A few (potential) inaccuracies were noted, including that, in Surf Scoters, there are at least some plumage differences, with most quite distinctive, between juvenile males and females in January–April; in White-winged Scoters, bill colour is not always useful for distinguishing juvenile males from females in the fall; and in Black Scoters, the degree of yellow speckling on the bill correlates with age in females, with after-second-year individuals having more than hatch-year individuals.

I read through accounts for the auks that I have banded in appreciable numbers (the two murrens *Uria* spp., the Razorbill *Alca torda*, Cassin's Auklet *Ptychoramphus aleuticus*, Rhinoceros Auklet *Cerorhinca monocerata*, and Atlantic Fratercula *arctica* and Tufted *F. cirrhata* Puffins). I was also impressed with the detail and accuracy of the accounts; I found little to question. A few statements related to the colour of hard parts seemed slightly inaccurate, perhaps because museum specimens rather than living birds were examined (e.g. the brilliant orange-yellow mouth lining of the Razorbill is described as "yellowish"). Also, the range of inter-individual variation in colours of hard parts was not always apparent from the brief descriptions (e.g. Rhinoceros Auklet feet are described as "dull yellowish with dusky webs," which is an oversimplification). I also felt that the bill profile of the Razorbill was exaggerated (Figs. 533 and 534), seeming much too short and thick. But none of the foregoing are major issues.

As for new information, it seems possible—and perhaps probable—based on recent Common Murre *U. aalge* banding efforts in British Columbia (Hipfner & Greenwood 2008), that some of the individuals that Pyle classifies as belonging to the (putative) subspecies *U. aalge californica* were actually *U. a. inornata*. There appears to be a sharp delineation between the two northeast Pacific morphotypes: notably, smaller-winged birds in California, Oregon and Washington, but larger-winged birds from British Columbia north. And we have found, based on molecularly-sexed individuals from the Triangle Island population in British Columbia, that sex in Rhinoceros Auklets can be reliably determined from bill depth immediately in front of the horn (males: >17.0 mm; females: <16.5 mm). For the few individuals within the region of overlap (16.5–17.0 mm) measured late in chick-rearing in two years, all birds weighing less than 500 g were females and all weighing more than 500 g were males (B. Addison unpubl. data). Presumably, these findings could provide a useful starting point from which to develop useful guides for other colonies.

The production of this identification guide clearly required a tremendous effort from Peter Pyle and his collaborators Steve N.G. Howell, Siobhan Ruck and David F. DeSante. We should be very grateful to them all for the incredible time and effort they invested in researching and writing this outstanding work. I highly recommend this book to anyone who conducts research with wild birds in the hand, and I would like to encourage ornithologists to contribute their new information as it becomes available. I am sure

that Part II in this series, like its predecessor, will soon find its place in all field camps where avian research is taking place.

#### REFERENCES

- HIPFNER, J.M. & GREENWOOD, J.L. 2008. Breeding biology of the Common Murre at Triangle Island, British Columbia, Canada, 2002–2007. *Northwestern Naturalist* 89: 76–84.
- HOWELL, S.N.G., CORBEN, C., PYLE, P. & ROGERS, D.I. 2003. The first basic problem: a review of molt and plumage homologies. *Condor* 106: 635–653.

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