

A FIELD GUIDE TO THE SOUTHEAST COAST AND GULF OF MEXICO: COASTAL HABITATS, SEABIRDS, MARINE MAMMALS, FISH, & OTHER WILDLIFE

Proctor, N.S. & Lynch, J.L. 2011. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 386 pp. 1114 color illustrations. Paperback-Flexibound: ISBN 978-0-300-11328-0, US \$24.

I remember my first “field guide” to coastal environments—the Golden Nature Guide *Seashores*. I pulled the 4 inch × 6 inch book off my bookshelf to refresh my memory. Published in 1955, it is “A guide to shells, sea plants, shore birds, and other natural features of American coasts” and boasts “475 marine subjects in full color.” The price listed on the cover is US \$1.00! Fortunately for all of us, field guides have improved significantly from those early Golden Guide days. *Seashores* is 160 pages in all, with seven pages of “shore birds” featuring 29 species. Fast forward 65 years to *A Field Guide to the Southeast Coast & Gulf of Mexico*. This impressive book is a comprehensive guide to 619 coastal and ocean species, with 1114 color illustrations and 452 range maps. Birds alone take 160 pages, with 124 species covered. The 5½ inch × 8¼ inch (13 × 21 cm) paperback guide has a flexibound cover, with flaps that can be used as page holders. It contains overviews of key ecological communities, including mangroves, salt marshes, beaches, sand dunes and coral reefs. The book also discusses threatened and endangered species as well as environmental issues, including such events as Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon blowout. With its focus on the entire marine coastal environment, it is the most up-to-date guide on those areas. As stated on the inside cover, it is “not just for beachgoers, it is valuable for birders, whale watchers, fishers, boaters, scuba divers and snorkelers, and shoreline visitors.”

Biologically and geographically, the southeastern Atlantic and Gulf Coasts form a continuous floral and faunal region from North Carolina to Texas. This book picks up geographically where a previous book by the same authors, *A Field Guide to North Atlantic Wildlife*, ended. Coverage extends from the Outer Banks of North Carolina to the barrier islands of southern Texas, including the Dry Tortugas and portions of the Bahamas and Cuba. In the introduction, the authors offer the following guidance: “Birds especially are a highly visible, diverse, and accessible form of wildlife that cannot be covered completely in a general guide, so we urge birders to carry along their favorite bird guide as a supplement to this book. Even if your passion is for a particular group of animals, we ask you to think in broad environmental terms, to look holistically at the coastal and offshore waters, and to see and appreciate the great cycles of migration and weather, human and natural activity, seasons and tides, that make the shoreline endlessly fascinating.”

Introductory pages describe the unique attributes of this region, including a section on the ecology of barrier islands and capes, with a cross-section diagram showing substrate and plant communities from the ocean side to the bay side of an island. For closet cartographers, four informative maps are presented: sea surface temperatures of the Gulf Stream and southeastern Atlantic coast from NOAA-NASA satellite imagery; major currents of the Caribbean, Gulf of Mexico, and southeastern Atlantic coast; a political map showing capes, shoals, bays, islands and keys,

reefs and major cities; and bathymetry and other geographic data showing marine shelves, canyons, banks, basins and channels.

Opposite the attractive color plates are details of identification, appearance, size, range, habits, and English and Latin names for birds, marine mammals, fish, sharks, rays, eels, shrimp, crabs, lobsters, sea turtles, crocodiles and alligators, baleen whales, toothed whales and dolphins, seals and manatees, jellyfish, invertebrates and marine and coastal plants (even floating seaweeds and common algae). Interestingly, two of the three endorsements on the back cover are by well-known birders and authors—Pete Dunne and David Sibley—and birds receive more coverage than any other group.

The strength of this guide is its coverage of ecosystems and biota in the southeast coast and Gulf of Mexico. Especially for seabird biologists from other countries or even the west coast of the US, this guide provides a concise overview of the more commonly encountered marine and beach plants and animals. Some may find covering only shorebirds, herons, seabirds and raptors deficient. However, as the authors suggest, this guide does not replace a bird field guide. It does have helpful features in the bird section. All ages and plumages are depicted for most species. There is a page illustrating size comparison of tern species. The names of endangered and threatened species (including non-birds) on the IUCN Red List are in red font. For those of us in the conservation community, it can be eye-opening to see how many non-bird species are on the Red List, such as 13 of the 16 shark species listed. One of my favorite features is a page of “Soaring birds along the coast” (seabirds and raptors) that indicates wingspan (in inches) and illustrates the birds in relative sizes. A valuable non-bird feature is the depiction of whale blow profiles, a valuable resource since that is sometimes the only visible identification of many whales. As bird biologists, we know the parts (topography) of birds. To help us with other creatures, the book shows topographies of sharks, rays, fish, turtles, dolphins and whales. If there is a shortcoming in this guide, it is with the range maps. For birds, the breeding, wintering and year-round ranges are depicted. However, there is no key for the colors. But this is a rather trivial omission since it is fairly easy to key the colors for breeding (yellow), wintering (blue) and year-round (green) ranges.

If you are planning a trip to this region, I highly recommend taking a copy of *A Field Guide to the Southeast Coast & Gulf of Mexico*. The whole is truly greater than the sum of its parts, and this guide will help you understand the intricate connections of these fascinating and alluring coastal habitats, along with key plants and animals that constitute the whole of these ecosystems.

Chris Eberly, US Department of Defense coordinator, Partners in Flight, Warrentown, VA (ceberly@dodpif.org)