

## **BOOK REVIEWS—RESEÑAS DE LIBROS—RESENHAS DE LIVROS**

**Edited by John G. Blake**

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**Birds of Northern South America. An Identification Guide.** — R. Restall, C. Rodner, & M. Lentino. 2007. Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut. Volume 1, 880 pp. & Volume 2, 656 pp., 306 color plates, numerous line illustrations, references, discography, indexes of scientific and English names. ISBN 978-0-300-10862-0 (Volume 1), 978-0-300-12415-6 (Volume 2). Soft cover. Price \$150.00 (2 volume set).

This two-volume set deals with the identification of 2308 species that occur within the limits of northern South America (Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Netherlands Antilles, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana). The completion of the work took 10 years and in Restall's own words, “[it] is essentially the product of the individual enthusiasm of three people”. The production of the major elements of the guide can be ascribed as follows: plates and species and subspecies descriptions made by Restall, distribution maps prepared by Lentino, and the majority of the rest of the text written by Rodner. The vast knowledge of the three authors was complemented by the work of a series of other contributors responsible for introductory chapters, several species accounts, and text and plate revisions, among others. The work was developed within the prestigious Phelps Ornithological Collection in Caracas, Venezuela, and the influences of this institution in terms of inspiration for the project and access to invaluable bird collections and bibliographic resources can not be

overemphasized. The overall result is an extraordinary piece of work.

The bulk of volume 1 is composed of the species accounts, preceded by several introductory chapters. The latter present the objectives of the book, explain taxonomic choices, and provide a concise key on how to use the guide. Also, topics such as the region's climate, vegetation, and habitats, as well as migration, conservation, and diversity patterns, are succinctly covered. A very short summary of ornithological research in the study region is also offered. I find all this information interesting and useful, but the assertion on p. 23 that Meyer de Schauensee & Phelps' (1978) field guide to Venezuelan Birds was “the first to any South American country” is not accurate. Some may consider it the first ‘modern’ one, but other true field guides on South America birds were available long before (e.g., Olrog 1959).

The species accounts section has an introduction to each bird family followed by information for each species on morphological characteristics, habits, status, habitat, and voice. Identification descriptions, which include subspecies, are particularly detailed. When relevant, a note is used at the end of a species account to deal with taxonomic issues (e.g., synonymy) and, within family sections, the characteristics of genera or other subgroups of species are highlighted in text boxes. Also, many line drawings have been interspersed within the text to show morphological and behavioral features. All this infor-

mation has been compiled to serve species identification, and thus is complementary to the plates in volume 2. Finally, there are several other additional sections, such as a glossary, a list of ornithological organizations, a bibliography, and a discography. The latter, compiled by S. Peters, provides a list of commercially available recordings for each species. This feature will be especially useful to all of those particularly interested in bird vocalizations.

Volume 2 is mainly composed by 306 color plates that depict 6388 birds and 2308 distributional maps. The plates are preceded by two of the introductory chapters included in volume 1 so as to enhance its utility in the field on its own. The amount of graphic information included represents an impressive effort to incorporate as much known plumage variation as possible. Particularly comprehensive examples are those for the Rufous-collared Sparrow (*Zonotrichia capensis*) and the Bananaquit (*Coereba flaveola*). These species are given 10 and 18 illustrations each, which in turn depict 8 and 15 subspecies, respectively. Age- and season-related plumage variation has also been dealt with in great detail as exemplified by the manakin and Nearctic warblers' species plates. Although these particular levels of graphic detail are not the norm throughout the whole volume, the amount of variation depicted is nonetheless truly outstanding. Illustrations are nicely complemented by pointers and caption text that draw attention to important morphological, habitat, and behavioral features. A distribution map is included for each species and, when multiple subspecies are illustrated, an effort has been made to indicate the approximate range of each of those. The species size and abbreviated data on altitudinal range, status, and abundance accompanies each species map. Although this guide deals with the birds of those countries listed above, distribution maps show extended species ranges across

northern Brazil and northern Peru, and thus make it very useful for this vast region also.

Without doubt what makes this work stand apart from other similar publications is the impressive collection of bird illustrations. On average, each species is represented by 2.8 illustrations in comparison to, for example, 1.2 in Hilty's (2003) "Birds of Venezuela" and 1.5 in Ridgely & Greenfield's (2001) "The Birds of Ecuador". In general, colors appear rich and vivid resulting in aesthetically pleasing plates. In a few cases, however, some colors seem too bold (e.g., blue tanagers and honeycreepers). The illustrations are high-quality overall, but some species are better depicted (e.g., cracids, toucans, antpittas, brush finches) than others (e.g., ibises, crakes, stilt). The Limpkin (*Aramus guarana*) and the American Oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*) look particularly awkward, whereas the piping guans and trumpeters (among many others) are splendid. In plate 136, tail lengths of *Colaptes* flickers are exaggerated; in the case of the Campo Flicker (*Colaptes campestris*) the tail is depicted probably twice as long as it should be. In order to provide more graphic information, some illustrations show both dorsal and ventral areas simultaneously and, intentionally, unnatural postures were used for some groups. I found these techniques useful and appropriate. In contrast, the decision to draw all the birds within a family proportionally has resulted in rather reduced illustrations for small-sized birds within families with significant size ranges (e.g., owls, cotingas). This rule seems somewhat relaxed for the woodpeckers resulting in adequate illustration sizes for the piculets. Finally, the use of space within plates is generally good, but varies (plates 251 and 274 provide contrasting examples). Given the many variables that ultimately determine the distribution of illustrations within and among plates, seemingly inefficient use of space probably reflects organizational constraints rather than a flaw.

Although the authors clearly state that their work “was never intended as a field guide” (but as a complement to other available guides), they have nonetheless, taken a series of steps to enhance the utility of volume 2 in this regards. As mentioned above, two of the introductory chapters from volume 1 are included, as well as caption text and abbreviated biological data with the species maps. Other very helpful features include a sturdy binding which will hold up to substantial field use and the inclusion of species distributional maps within the color plates. As a tool for field identification, however, volume 2 is not entirely satisfactory. The most important constraint is, of course, the need to rely only on the plates for identification. As Restall puts it, “field-guide users generally like plates, but trust text”. Portability is another issue as volume 2 weights almost 1.5 kg; this is one limitation common to any field book dealing with such a diverse avifauna.

Despite these minor criticisms, “Birds of

Northern South America” is an outstanding work for which the authors are to be commended. It is an extremely useful resource for tackling the identification challenges posed by the overwhelmingly rich avifauna of this part of the continent and I am happy to recommend it whole-heartedly to both field researchers and serious birding enthusiasts interested in the birds of this region.—Adrián B. Azpiroz, Department of Biology, University of Missouri-St. Louis, One University Blvd., St. Louis, Missouri 63121, USA.

#### REFERENCES

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