

BIRDERS' BOOKSHELF

Birds of Yosemite and the East Slope
David Gaines. 1988. Artemisia Press.
352 + xvi pp., 15 line drawings, 13 photographs. Softbound. \$16.50 includes domestic handling and shipping. Calif. residents add 6% sales tax. Order from Artemisia Press, P.O. Box 119, Lee Vining, CA 93541.

BIRDS, BECAUSE OF THEIR HIGH metabolic rate and prominent ecological position near the top of most food webs, and because they are relatively easily observed and counted, may serve as ideal subjects for environmental monitoring. Local changes in the status, distribution, and abundance of birds may alert us to important changes in the local environment, or even to large-scale changes in environments that are thousands of miles away, such as the tropical rain forests where substantial numbers of our breeding landbirds spend the winter. Information about whether the numbers and ranges of birds are increasing, decreasing, or remaining the same is becoming more important as changes in the environment continue to accelerate. Detailed baseline data on the status, distribution, and abundance of birds in select, well-defined localities, therefore, is becoming more and more in demand. This is especially true of areas whose avifaunas are relatively well-known and where good avifaunal coverage is likely to continue.

The Yosemite Sierra is one such place. Lured by the promise of spectacular scenery, rich wildlife, and a land little touched by civilization, birders and nature lovers have flocked to the Yosemite area. Over the years, they have amassed a vast amount of detailed information on the birds of this exquisite land. David Gaines has meticulously and exhaustively researched and referenced this mass of data, and in his new book, *Birds of Yosemite and the East Slope*, he has produced what may well be the finest and most complete summary of a local avifauna ever published. Here is a wealth of new and fascinating information, including thousands of

unpublished records, arrival and departure dates, peak numbers, nesting localities, high altitude occurrences, and detailed habitat requirements. Indeed, this is a carefully constructed analysis of the avifauna of the Yosemite Sierra that will serve as the baseline and benchmark against which future data on Yosemite's birds will be compared.

But not all birders and nature lovers come to Yosemite to provide data on a changing avifauna or are obsessed with the desire to understand distributional minutiae. Most, in fact, come to relax, to savor the sights and sounds of Yosemite's rich birdlife in its wild and glorious natural setting. It is to these pilgrims that Gaines may well speak the best. With a minimum of wordiness and with a clarity of voice that evokes the crystal clear streams and lofty granite spires, Gaines gently introduces each species as a distinct avian personality. He writes of the birds in the simple, familiar, matter-of-fact way in which you would describe someone or something that you know very well. His is not the cold, impersonal voice of science that

often disguises a lack of real understanding with dry statistics. Rather, his warm and loving accounts are written by one who knows and appreciates the birds as friends. As he writes in his preface, "Though I hope the book earns the approbation of ornithologists, I will be well pleased if it speaks to the hearts of bird lovers." In *Birds of Yosemite and the East Slope*, Gaines certainly hits his mark.

David Gaines did indeed know the birds as friends. He spent 20 years hiking in Yosemite's mountains, quietly watching and listening. For most of these years he led classes and courses on birds and natural history that took him back to the same places at the same times year after year. For ten years he resided year-round in Lee Vining, a town alongside Mono Lake's shores at the eastern base of the Sierra. The avifauna of the Mono Basin and other nearby areas on the east side of the Yosemite Sierra are, therefore, included in this book as well as Yosemite National Park itself. Certainly no one has a more thorough and intimate understanding



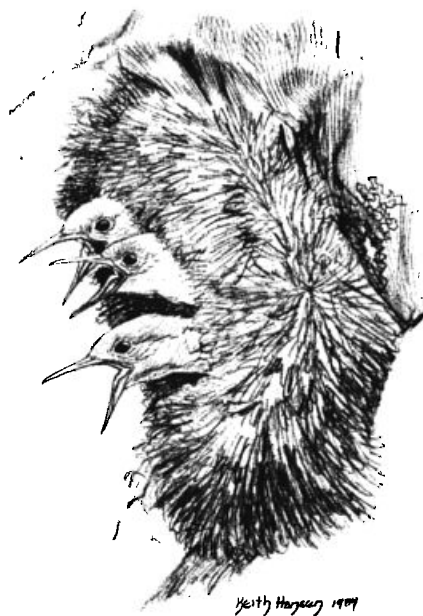
Wilson's Phalaropes at Mono Lake. All illustrations by Keith Hansen from "Birds of Yosemite and the East Slope."

proper, and in eight additional localities that are heavily favored by birders. I hope that other writers will follow Gaines' lead in adapting these codes to their local avifaunas, thus allowing all of us to speak the same language when discussing the status and abundance of birds.

The book is filled with many other worthwhile diversions and enhancements, including a hypothetical list, an exhaustive bibliography, and an index. Simple, elegant line drawings and a stunning, full-color cover by noted artist Keith Hansen add beauty to the text, while a collection of excellent black-and-white photos of some of the region's *rara aves* stimulates the visual sense of wonder. At a price of \$16.50, the book is a bargain and should be in every ornithologist's and bird lover's library.

I admit to having difficulty in finding serious fault with this book. Sure, the bar graph seems to be missing for Chukar, the summary of status and abundance for the Pied-billed Grebe is not in italics, and a Rufous-crowned Sparrow record from Yosemite Valley was on 10/34/34, but my only real criticism is that text citations are neither consistently nor properly coded. The coding of text citations to published material is similar to the coding for citations to unpublished observations by individuals. Thus we find that GF represents observations by Gary Fugle while GM represents Grinnell and Miller's classic tome *Distribution of the Birds of California* published in 1944. This tends to be confusing since the reader cannot tell at a glance whether a given citation represented a thoroughly researched topic that culminated in a scientific paper or book, or was merely a single casual observation. In some cases, the citation is undecipherable. For example, I cannot determine who it was that stated that Winter Wrens reside year-round on the "east slope . . . south to Mammoth" (SU 294).

Nevertheless, we owe a debt of gratitude to David Gaines for bridging the gap between the cold impersonal voice of the scientist and the warm personal voice of the storyteller. Indeed, he has emulated the clear accurate succinctness of California's master ecologists, Joseph Grinnell and Alden Miller, and simultaneously captured the magical poetic lyricism of California's master naturalists, John Muir and William Leon Dawson. Listen . . .



American Dipperlets at nest

"Though they lack the dulcet songs of other thrushes, I fancy Mountain Bluebirds the loveliest of all Sierran birds. As they hover over flowery meadows or glide to perches atop rocks or trees, their delicate grace lifts the heart. The sun catches their plumage, turning it bluer than the mountain sky above. They are not merely birds; they are feathered epiphanies."—D.F.D.

We thank Dave DeSante for his careful reading and thoughtful book review.

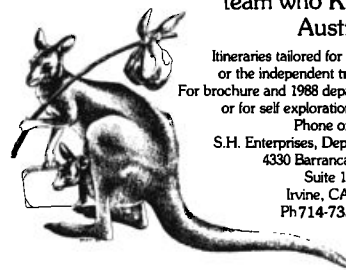


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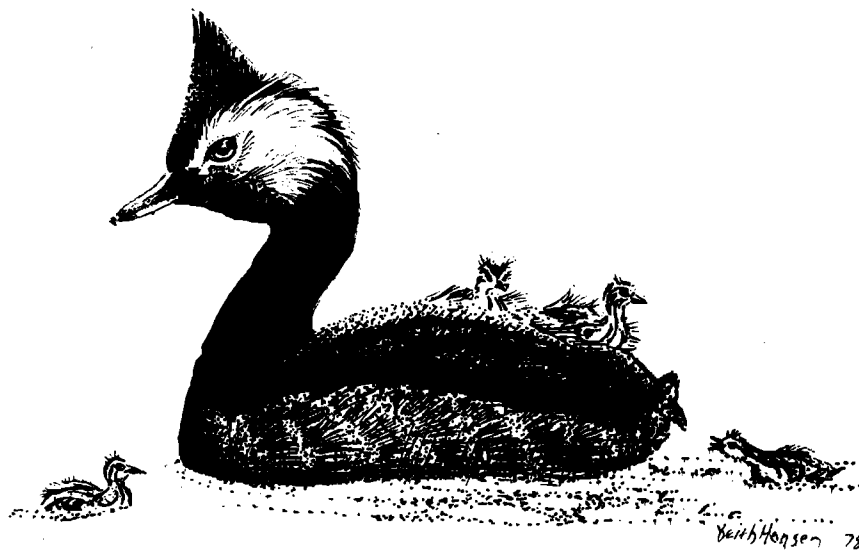
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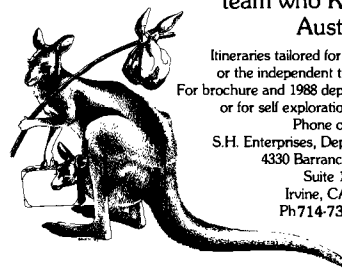


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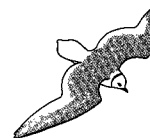
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