

BIRDERS' BOOKSHELF

Birds of the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia

Robert A., Richard J., and Sydney G. Cannings published by the Royal British Columbia Museum available from: *The Royal Museum Shop, 675 Belleville Street, Victoria, B.C., Canada V8V 1X4. Price: \$37.50(CDN) cloth (plus \$3.00 postage/handling), \$27.50(CDN) paper (plus \$1.50 postage/handling).*

IMMEDIATELY NORTH OF THE INTERNATIONAL Boundary in extreme southcentral British Columbia lies the Okanagan Valley. Located in the rain-shadow of the Coast and Cascade mountain ranges, parts of the Okan-

agan Valley bottom record as little as 10 inches (250 mm) of precipitation annually, thus supporting a semi-arid steppe climate unique to Canada. The area has been referred to as "Canada's Pocket Desert" and is a northward extension of the Great Basin and dry montane forests of the western United States. At lower elevations, sagebrush grassland, antelope brush, riparian woodland, and dry ponderosa pine forest habitats are found; while at higher elevations cooler and wetter conditions result in more widespread western Canadian habitats such as Engelmann spruce-subalpine fir forests and alpine tundra (local). This results not only in a rich species diversity but also in the presence of a significant number of species at or near the northern limit of their range. The Okanagan is the best, or only, place in Canada to see such species as Common Poorwill, White-throated Swift, Black-chinned Hummingbird, Williamson's Sapsucker, White-headed Woodpecker, Gray Flycatcher, Pygmy Nuthatch, Canyon Wren, Western Bluebird, and Sage Thrasher.

Despite almost a century of ornithological exploration, a thorough treatment of the Okanagan Valley's avifauna had never been published, until now. Not only does the *Birds of the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia* fill this major need, it also *clearly represents one of the best, most thorough books on the status, distribution, and natural history of a region's bird-life ever published.* This is an excellent book! Authored by Robert A., Richard J., and Sydney G. Cannings, three brothers from a family of Okanagan naturalists, the book covers not only the valley itself, but includes the entire Okanagan River watershed, an area of 8136 square kilometers in size and encompassing a range of elevations from 277 to 2304 meters.

It begins with excellent introductory sections on the physiography, climate, vegetation, ornithological and general history of the area, and historical trends in the region's avifauna. It also contains fine maps and a thorough bibliography. Many superb black-and-white photos depict the region's

overall geography, early ornithological exploration, major vegetation types, and the habitat changes which have occurred. Individual species accounts make up the main body of the text and are presented for each of the 307 species (193 of which breed or have bred locally) recorded in the region through June 1987. These thoroughly-referenced, well-written accounts contain a wealth of information on the species' status, distribution, and natural history (including extensive breeding information). Detailed histograms are included for all species, except accidentals, which chart all the available records, each plotted by one-week increments for the entire year. For some common species there may be well over 1000 individual records (over 126,000 total records), showing the work required to accumulate them all. These histograms not only depict seasonal changes in abundance, but also delineate breeding vs non-breeding records, the range of dates for the presence of eggs and flightless young, and the frequency with which Christmas Bird Counts record the species.

Are there *any* shortcomings or omissions to be found in the *Birds of the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia*? Yes, after looking for a long time I could find two, but they are not major. The treatment of *subspecies* is somewhat incomplete. For example, the races of a number of species such as Yellow-rumped Warbler, Brewer's Sparrow (interesting), Song Sparrow, and Northern Oriole, are covered, but those of Solitary Vireo, Fox Sparrow, and Red Crossbill are not. And many of the shorebird species accounts could use more information on the relative status of adults vs. juveniles in the fall.

In sum, the *Birds of the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia* is highly recommended for anyone interested in this unique area, in bird distribution in North America in general, or in seeing how an excellent, attractive, thorough, readable, and well-referenced book on the status and distribution of the birds of a region is done!—Paul Lehman.

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The Common Loon: spirit of northern lakes

Judith W. McIntyre, 1988. *Drawings by Anne Olson. Forward by William H Marshall. Published by The University of Minnesota Press, 2037 University Avenue Southeast, Minneapolis, MN 55414. xii + 228 pages, 26 color photographs, many drawings, disc recording of loon vocalizations. Hard bound. \$25.00.*

THE MOST VALUABLE BOOKS ARE often those by authors with a love for their subject, patience to study it in depth, and a determination to discover all they can about it. That Dr. McIntyre has these qualifications is evident in *The Common Loon*. Furthermore, the problems we face in saving this species make it a timely book, the appeal of loons, themselves, a popular one, and the breadth of coverage, a valuable one.

The 12 chapters deal with myths, time of arrival on the breeding grounds, courtship, mating and the nesting cycle, relationships among members of the family, parasites and diseases, populations, behavioral ecology, social behavior, communication, evolution and classification, anatomy and plumages, distribution and migration, and human impact on loons and what we are doing about the problems that we have caused. An extensive bibliography is appended.

Science writing that is at the same time precise, lucid, and understandable to laymen as well as scientists is all too rare. Too many scientists pepper their writing with jargon, ignoring the dictum to "eschew obfuscation," while too many popular writers are imprecise in their choice of words, inaccurate in their facts, or both. Indeed, it is often thought (even by publishers) that writing with an appeal to such a wide audience is an impossibility. As a student, I once pooh-poohed the thought of doing popular writing, while at that time complaining to a professor about how difficult it was to understand the papers of a certain distinguished geneticist and was told that if I really wanted to understand the geneticist's ideas, I should read the book reviews he had written. If only he, and others like

him, wrote their scientific papers for the non-specialist, how much better our scientific work would be understood and appreciated! Dr. McIntyre has succeeded admirably in showing that writing for a broad readership can be done and done well.

In the 20 years she has been studying loons, Dr. McIntyre spent much of her research time in the field studying their behavior and ecology (natural history in the best sense). She has also been a leader in the effective fight to save the Common Loon.

In the book, her many original observations are combined with pertinent information from the literature in a smooth exposition in which the sources of the information are always clear. Areas in which the author has had less experience are well summarized from the literature and often contain unpublished information contributed by other researchers. These chapters especially show the benefit of having been reviewed by specialists. The book has been well edited and is almost without error. It has also been attractively designed. The result is an excellent monograph.

The illustrations include a series of fine black-and-white figures showing various behavior patterns. These are essential to a clear understanding of the descriptions in the text. Also illustrated are parts of the skeleton and the variously patterned feathers of a Common Loon in breeding dress. The drawing of the last is cleverly designed to show where on the body each feather pattern is found. A series of 10 colored plates with up to five photographs per plate adds substance and interest to the book.

A disc of vocalizations of the Common Loon is found in an envelope on the inside back cover. This disc contains examples of the vocalizations of both adult and young loons. There is no oral explanation on the disc itself, but a list on the envelope gives the sequence of calls. For sonographs and a discussion of the messages contained in the vocalizations one must refer to the chapter on communications. The information is all there, but it takes time to put it together. For learning the adults' calls and their variations, the record or tape, *Voices in the Loon* (published by the North American Loon Fund), is much handier, but it does not contain vocalizations of the young. Both include the sounds of

choruses that give a fine feeling for the atmosphere that loons' calls elicit.

Another valuable feature of the book is the debunking of misconceptions about loons. For one thing, the loons' spectacular behavior on the breeding grounds, chasing, running, and calling, have often been referred to as "courtship." The truth is that the courtship behavior that has been documented for loons is quite simple, and unlike the elaborate courtship displays of grebes.

Another popular misconception is that loons are "primitive." This even appears on a jacket blurb in which a well known ornithologist refers to loons as "one of our most primitive . . . birds." This is particularly unfortunate because in the book, Dr. McIntyre goes to considerable length to point out that the idea of "primitiveness" stems from a superficial resemblance of loons to the early toothed diver, *Hesperornis*, that this resemblance is merely the result of convergent evolution, that loons are highly specialized for their way of life, and that loons diverged from the basal stock of modern birds well after *Hesperornis* became extinct.

This book is a source of accurate information, clearly presented and should appeal to all with an interest in loons and the wilderness they inhabit.

Effective conservation measures should be based on sound research. This book provides an excellent basis to apply to the Common Loon. Our own species is unique in the development of the brain and the reasoning power this has made possible. But these are two-edged swords. Our wrong thinking has resulted in damage to environments, the loss of some species, and threats to others. On the other hand, our salvation and that of creatures like the loon must depend on our thinking problems out clearly and applying appropriate solutions to them. These problems cannot be solved by those merely seeking material gain or by those who rely on emotional approaches or the supernatural.—Robert W. Storer.

