

BIRDERS' BOOKSHELF

A Field Guide to Western Birds, Third Edition

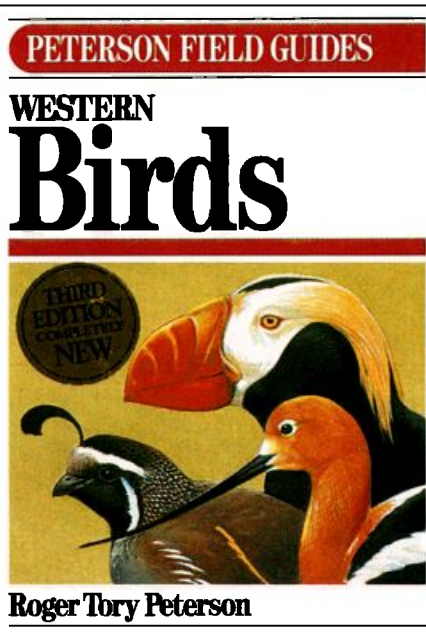
Roger Tory Peterson. 1990.
Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston.
432 pp. Hardbound, \$22.95.
Paperbound, \$15.95.

To make comparisons between the Third Edition of the "western Peterson" and any other field guide would trivialize an event of epic proportions. The book is a masterpiece of design and execution, and characteristics which exemplify these qualities should be noted. This Third Edition, however, must be evaluated in terms of its historical significance, its intended use, and what it does.

In 1934, Roger Tory Peterson set the standard for all field guides when he produced the first edition of *A Field Guide to the Birds*. Each subsequent edition of that guide and *A Field Guide to Western Birds* has been an event welcomed and acclaimed by the birders of America. For me, waiting for the appearance of the Third Edition of the Western Peterson was nostalgic. As a young teacher birding in Florida and waiting for the Second Edition back in 1961, I had the same feelings—excitement, anticipation, and the expectation that I would see and read about birding possibilities that had never before been portrayed. And therein lies the essence of why the appearance of this current publication is so important.

The new Western Peterson is not the third in a series, but the twelfth. Peterson has produced five different field guides to the birds of various areas of the world: Eastern United

States (3 editions), Western United States (3 editions), Texas, Mexico, and Europe (4 editions). These five were produced in their initial form over a period of 39 years. Every decade from the thirties through the seventies saw the introduction of another First Edition of a Peterson field guide to the birds. Twenty-seven years would pass before the Second Editions of both the Eastern and Western Guides were released. It has taken twenty-nine additional years to see the release of the Third Editions of both guides. The chronology is as follows:



- 1934 *Eastern Guide, First Edition*
- 1941 *Western Guide, First Edition*
- 1947 *Eastern Guide, Second Edition*
- 1954 *European Guide, First Edition*
- 1960 *Texas Guide*
- 1961 *Western Guide, Second Edition*
- 1966 *European Guide, Second Edition*
- 1973 *Mexican Guide*
- 1974 *European Guide, Third Edition*
- 1980 *Eastern Guide, Third Edition*
- 1983 *European Guide, Fourth Edition*
- 1990 *Western Guide, Third Edition*

Each new edition brought improvements on the basic concept that Roger Peterson introduced in his first field guide—that "field-marks" can be shown on patternistic drawings to assist the amateur as well as the pro-

fessional in identifying birds in the field without having to shoot them. Each new guide and each new edition contained additional color plates, with the individual birds shown larger on the page as the number of color plates increased. The Third Edition of the Western Guide is a grand example. Totally new paintings of more than 1000 individual birds representing some 700 species are depicted on 165 color plates—an astounding accomplishment!

From the beginning to the present, while there have been numerous evolutionary improvements, there have been only three significant changes in the Peterson field guides to the birds: the placement of the text relative to the illustrations, the inclusion of range maps, and the style of the illustrations. All three of these changes are represented in the Third Editions of the Eastern and now the Western Guides.

The text now accompanies the paintings of each species on the facing page. The new format is definitely more functional for a field guide. The only legitimate concern that this change brings is that the amount of text is limited to the space available on the facing page. In the earlier editions, since there was no such space limitation, many enlightening and helpful hints, as well as other bits of interesting information, were included under the textual accounts of each species.

In the Third Editions of the Eastern and Western guides, Virginia Peterson has painstakingly prepared 390 and 441 detailed range maps, respectively. These maps represent a prominent and vital feature of the books: In many cases the maps are large enough to provide precise detail and they are presented in a multi-color format which delineates the seasonal range of each species.

Occasionally, a map fails to show the occurrence of a species in a given area. Even with the endless hours of

research that was performed in preparing the maps, it was and still would be impossible to locate every data point regarding an issue as fluid as the ever-changing occurrence-patterns of birds. Birds have wings, and they have not seen Mrs. Peterson's maps. But the fact that a given species has occurred in an area where the map indicates that it has not occurred, is of little consequence. This is a field *guide*, not a field encyclopedia! The maps are intended to depict the range of the species, not every extralimital occurrence. The maps are exciting displays of where to go and what you might see there. And that is exactly the way they will be used.

In the Third Editions, the birds appear less as "patternistic drawings" and more as portraits. This change is one of style more than substance: It adds immeasurably to the beauty of the guide, but does not add much to its technical adequacy as a field guide. With the birds depicted in larger form, Peterson is able to show additional details, but he also risks making incidental errors of shading and hue or in extent and presence of a given characteristic. And it is here that most of the comparisons are made between the current editions and other field guides. The birders of today have become much more demanding in their expectations because of the existence of many different guides by many different artists. But the very idea of making such comparisons is built on the initial concept of the *Peterson* field guide. Ironically, Roger Peterson is responsible for the expectations that have caused his own followers to criticize the details of his work.

Prior to 1934, no one had seen a Peterson Field Guide, so there were no expectations. After Peterson published the first Eastern Guide, it was inevitable that there would be a companion guide to the birds of the East, the publication of which started a veritable migration of Eastern birders

to points west of the 100th Meridian. I would bet that more Western Peterson's were initially sold in the East than in the West! The sleeping giant of western birding was awaiting the likes of Guy McCaskie and Arnold Small. And the publication of the first editions of both *A Field Guide to the Birds* and *A Field Guide to Western Birds* inspired an army of young birders. With each succeeding new field guide or edition, the knowledge base has expanded, and with that increased level of awareness has come a ground-swell of excitement, further anticipation, and birding sophistication.

I will never forget the day when I first saw a Peterson Field Guide. I was a 10-year-old birder who didn't even know that such a book existed. A fellow birdwatcher and schoolmate, Arthur Evans, had just obtained a copy of the recently published Second Edition of the Eastern Guide. Arthur invited me to his mother's office to view this wonderful thing. Mrs. Evans handed me the book, and my life was never the same again. There are no words to describe the thrill of that moment. I didn't know what to do. I lost all rational thought. I asked Mrs. Evans for paper and pencil, and I began to copy the names—just the names—of the warblers that existed. Somehow I had to take something from that book with me that day! I filled a sheet of paper with names, and with great pain I surrendered the book to Mrs. Evans.

Thereafter, I lived for the day when I would have a Peterson Guide of my own. Arthur and his mother gave me a copy for my birthday. I still have that book. It has been rained on, chewed by bugs, stained by food and drink, and, finally, re-bound when it fell apart. It would be worthless in a used-book sale, but to me it is priceless. And, somehow, therein lies the essence of the Peterson Field Guides. From the very beginning, in 1934, the Peterson Guides have been bringing excitement and information to

young and old alike. That is what the books are supposed to do—and that is what they do best.

Now, a whole shelf of the library in our living room is dedicated to the "Peterson Field Guide Series." Just to see all of those titles in a row is like a religious experience! Would that we could learn to appreciate the many things written with nature's pen. No rational human would think of ripping pages from a sacred book, but the human race is ripping not just pages, but entire chapters from the sacred world. Every time a species is lost, every time a plot of ground is paved, every time an oil spill occurs, irreplaceable messages—call them environmental indicators, if you must—are ripped from the pages of time.

How can field guides counter this rampant, senseless destruction? They provide mankind with the Edenic experience of naming the primal form of conquering nature in appreciation and support rather than in destruction. In war, man destroys the nameless entities of the enemy. What man feels close to—related to by name, if you please—he protects. The realization that weeds are wildflowers is just as much a conversion as anyone receives at a revival. Becoming aware of the fact that flying objects formerly dismissed as "birds" are creatures of profound beauty and grace—each with a name and survival needs—leads to responsible stewardship of the planet and an increased appreciation for life.

I believe that the Third Edition of *A Field Guide to Western Birds*, like its eleven predecessors, was intended to reveal to the reader the excitement that is possible in the world of birds and to inspire an appreciation of the feathered inhabitants of our planet. In my very considered opinion, the Third Edition presents significant improvements of an order that can only increase the effectiveness of the series. May it fulfill its destiny.

—James A. Tucker,
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania