

---

# Books

---

**Identification Guide to European Passerines.** Lars Svensson. Available for \$15 cash or \$18 check or money-order from the author at: Sturegatan 60, S-114 36 Stockholm, Sweden.

Interest in the accurate determination of identity, age, and sex of birds in the hand has steadily increased in recent decades. It is surprising, therefore, that a rather substantial disparity of aging technique and information exists between North American banders and our counterpart "ringers" in Europe, an indication that there is much yet to be learned. How often, for instance, do Americans use such criteria as shape of the primary coverts or relative lengths of the rectrices to assist in the accurate aging of birds? And how well do we understand the timing, sequence and completeness of molt patterns such that we may age Nearctic species by relative feather color and wear? In Europe, knowledge of such characteristics at both general and specific levels is comparatively quite advanced. On the other hand, skulling and the ossification of birds seems to be a relatively new and unexplored area for them.

**Identification Guide to European Passerines** (third edition, 1984) by Swedish ringer and ornithologist Lars Svensson is a complete compendium of in-the-hand identification, aging and sexing criteria for European passerines. With 312 pages it represents a 70% increase over the first (1970) and second (1975) editions and supplies a thoroughness and accuracy that only 14 years of trial and feedback from fellow ornithologists can provide. It also reflects the state-of-the-art in Europe, outlining the latest in emphasis, criteria, and technique, upon which bird handlers around the world can base new insight and ideas.

After a brief forward, a full 35 pages of "Identification Guide" are devoted to handling techniques. Accompanied by many descriptive illustrations, we are first instructed on the proper use of the guide. For comparability, it is important that measuring techniques between guide and user be standardized. Fourteen pages are devoted to this, detailing different methods employed and those chosen for use in the guide. Three methods of wing measurement are described, for example, and Svensson presents a good argument for using the maximum flattened wing length over both the minimum "wing-chord" used widely in North America, and the natural flattened length previously popular in Europe. It apparently yields the "most reproducible and comparable" wing measurements and is the method currently being adopted by many Europeans. I think American banders would be wise to adopt this procedure as well, to ensure future comparability in Holarctic species. I am not as fond, however, of Svensson's

choice of tail measuring methods (placing the ruler parallel to the tail and between the rectrices and the under-tail coverts), preferring to place the ruler perpendicular to the tail and between the two central rectrices. In general, though, the thoroughness and value of this section can not be overstated.

We next find a 21 page section on general aging and sexing techniques, and it is here that we first encounter the different emphases of ringers and banders. Nearly half of the section is devoted to feather molt, shape and wear. The sequence, timing and completeness of molt patterns are fully detailed, and these are then related to feather shape and wear and to methods of aging birds on these bases. Feathers retained during an incomplete post-juvenile molt, for example, are often more pointed and of a less durable quality in comparison to adult or molted juvenile feathers. And, of course, older and more exposed feathers will be comparatively more faded and worn. Through experience and knowledge of general and specific molt patterns, Europeans are able to age a large percentage of fall birds using these characteristics. Other general techniques outlined include separating juveniles by contour feather texture, gape, and bill shape; aging with growth bars; and sexing by cloacal protuberance, incubation patch, and size. Illustrative drawings again accompany the text.

Where the Europeans are comparatively advanced in feather related criteria, they still seem relatively uncomfortable with skulling. This is reflected by a rather short and hesitant section on this subject in *Identification Guide*. The statement on page 35 that the procedure of skulling birds is "rather slow and cannot be practised in a general ringing routine" may come as a surprise to banders here. With experience, many Americans are now accurately skulling passerine species in as little as 10-15 seconds. It is easy to see how the acceptance of feather-related techniques may have retarded the development of skulling experience in Europe, while the reverse is true in North America. Ideally, both techniques should be regularly employed by bird handlers so the individuals showing unusual ossification or molt patterns may be recognized and more fully examined.

The most comprehensive section of *Identification Guide* and the most important part for European ringers is the 245 page systematic list. Detailed identification, aging and sexing criteria are presented individually, and in a standard format for over 250 species and distinct sub-species of passerines, including many Asiatic forms occurring only as vagrants to Europe. Excellent descriptive illustrations, drawn by the author, accompany almost every species and greatly simplify the determination process for users.

Species accounts (headed by the scientific name - a necessity in multilingual Europe) include a section on specific and/or subspecific, in-hand, identification criteria; information on molt sequence and completeness; all known or suspected criteria for aging and sexing the species; and a list of references (including 313 titles in all) on which the information is based.

The emphasis on feather related techniques is again apparent throughout the accounts. Wing formulae and information on emargination are presented to assist in identifying many of the species. We learn of the unusual molt sequence of the spotted Flycatcher, that many European parids can be aged by the pointedness of the greater primary coverts, that the relative lengths of the rectrices can be used to age the Long-tailed Tit, and the many buntings can be aged by the shape of the outer rectrix tips. We also see that the timing of the ossification process for many Palearctic species is indicated by only one or two late fall examples, implying that more skulling by ringers is most assuredly in order.

The extensive use of standardized abbreviation in this section coupled with a concise writing style found throughout *Identification Guide* has allowed Svensson to present this wealth of information in a well bound, pocket-sized (4¼" × 7¼") edition. In addition to the obvious value of the guide to ringers, the collation of current information serves to define and direct them to areas in need of future research. A basis is thus provided for the development of their knowledge in the field.

*Identification Guide to European Passerines* is, of course, considered an absolute must for European ringers. But what are its values to North American banders? Of the 207 full species treated by Svensson, only 25 breed regularly in the Nearctic, and many of these are of different races, lessening the usefulness of the measurement criteria. Observations here of Palearctic passerine vagrants have increased in recent years, and there's always the chance of capturing one. Indeed, this reviewer found the guide extremely useful for confirming the identification of a Brown Shrike captured this past fall on S.E. Farallon Is., California. But the real value of *Identification Guide* to Americans lies in its potential to help improve trans-Atlantic communications in handling techniques and criteria for determinations, especially in related taxa. In a long needed article (*Toward more effective age determination of banded birds*, NABB 9(1):2-4, 1984), Robert P. Yunick calls our attention to many of these general techniques. But what about at the species or genus level? If Palearctic Parids can be aged by shape of the greater primary coverts, what about Nearctic Parids? Or, perhaps, we can age Nearctic species by the presence or absence of spots on the tongue, as can be done with certain Old World warblers. Surely there must be many examples of Holarctic uniformity in criteria at the family or genus level. For reasons like these, North American banders interested in the development of handling and identification techniques would be remiss not to take advantage of this invaluable guide.

Peter Pyle

