
Books

ALL THE BIRDS of North America. Jack L. Griggs. 1997. Harper Perennial, New York. unpaginated. \$19.95 U.S.; \$28.50 Can.

ALL THE BIRDS of North America, the latest entrant in the ever-expanding North American field guide market, is brought to us by the American Bird Conservancy. To quote from the cover, it promotes a “revolutionary system based on feeding behaviors and field recognizable features” to aid in bird identification. Further, we are promised that its “large-format, full color illustrations set new standards for beauty and accuracy.” And finally, this book is “for both beginning and advanced birders.”

Obvious features to assess in choosing a field guide are the arrangement, the quality of the art, the adequacy of the verbal descriptions, the size and accuracy of the range maps, the physical size of the guide, and the quality of the paper and binding.

The arrangement of this guide is unique, reflecting the approach to identification recommended in it. Identification is made essentially through matching the bird sighted with icons on the front and back inside covers of the book—water birds in the front and land birds in the back. Land birds are then divided into two segments: one includes nocturnal, aerialist, ground-walking, and tree-climbing land birds; the other the “perching” or “songbirds.” The songbirds are where the feeding behavior mentioned on the cover comes in—they are recognized by bill shape and size.

In general, this system results in as logical an arrangement of families as found in most other field guides. But there are some rather spectacular points at which the system breaks down completely. Kingfishers and the American Dipper are on the same page, designated as “upland water birds,” for which no icon is shown. Greater Roadrunner is designated a “ground-walker,” placing it on the same page as pheasants and Wild Turkey. Only slightly less bizarre is the grouping of Phainopepla with Rose-throated Becard and Scissor-tailed and Fork-tailed flycatchers. Northern

Mockingbird, based on bill size and shape, is pictured with the jays, whereas Sage Thrasher and wrens are grouped with “curved bills.”

How important is it to keep family members together? Banders are aware that much is understood about a bird by knowing its family. Thus, when Northern Mockingbird is placed with the jays instead of with other mimids, an inaccurate picture of its behavior is suggested. Identification is easier if birds that look alike are placed together. Unfortunately, Boreal Chickadee and Siberian Tit are separated by many pages (because Alaskan birds are grouped separately), making it more difficult to compare these similarly plumaged birds, whose ranges overlap.

The quality and appeal of the artwork constitute another major factor in choosing a field guide. Photographs can be striking, but artwork is more useful for serious bird identification because, as Roger Tory Peterson proved so successfully in his guides, paintings can highlight critical field marks that photos often do not. For example, the image of Boreal Chickadee shows the sharply defined lower edge to its black bib, while that of Siberian Tit shows the ragged lower edge of its bib. Unfortunately, this important set of field marks is not mentioned in the abbreviated text, and is less likely to be noted by users, since the images are not side by side.

The artwork in **ALL THE BIRDS** is visually appealing, especially because a bit of background is included. But the quality is quite variable, partly because several illustrators participated. The woodpecker drawings are quite good and the falcon flight silhouettes are very nice. But hummingbird colors are too gaudy—the greens on Rufous and Anna’s are too bright, for instance. The nightjars are very stylized, jays are muted, and the Western Scrub-Jay image is the coastal form, brighter than the drab interior form. There are some inaccuracies. Curve-billed Thrasher does not show the plumage differences between Texas and Arizona adults (but merges the back and wings of an Arizona bird with the breast of a Texas bird, nor does the text discuss

this). The juvenile illustrated should not have a bright yellow eye with the bill length shown.

The text supplementing the illustrations for most species is too short to emphasize important field marks, highlighted by Peterson with arrows on the illustrations. The pages used to cover extinct species at the front of the book would have been better used to expand the text for each species and to enlarge some tiny bird drawings.

Range maps are small and colors do not contrast well, an all too common problem with field guides. Abundance notations are occasionally questionable. For example, Gila Woodpecker, Gilded Flicker and Phainopepla are all listed as "scarce," one notch above "rare."

Written descriptions of songs and calls are very short, sometimes too short to impart necessary information. The verbalization of vocalizations, as in most guides, could have been omitted for most species. The songs and calls of birds are very difficult to translate into useful letter equivalents.

Information for users about identification, conservation and a bit on how to use the book is buried in the middle of the book. It is interesting and deserves to be at the front. Finding it is pure luck, because there is no table of contents. Various sections begin with some useful general

observations about behavior and identification for the group of birds covered therein.

The "Mexican specialties," so important to southwestern birding, are given short shrift in **ALL THE BIRDS**. They get small pictures and two-lined printed descriptions, whereas there is a whole section on Arctic species found in Alaska, including the Aleutian Islands.

A book about a topic as fluid as birds should never be named "all" of anything. Missing are Cinnamon Hummingbird, Blue Mockingbird and Gray Silky Flycatcher, to name three that come to mind.

ALL THE BIRDS appears to have a sturdy binding and good paper. It is a handy field size and feels good in the hand.

In closing, **ALL THE BIRDS** is attractive and no more or less accurate than some of the other newer field guides. It does incorporate the 1995 taxonomic splits, but these were mostly "recognizable forms" which banders already report. Banders who buy every field guide that comes along will probably want it. For first or second purchases, however, it has no inherent advantages over the Peterson eastern and western guides and the National Geographic guide.

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