An Alternative View of Peter Pyle's Identification Guide

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ABSTRACT

A method of customizing the age/sex data in Peter Pyle's book, *Identification Guide to North American Birds: Part 1*, for field use is presented. This alternative method involves preparing keys for selected species by extracting similar clauses for given age/sex combinations and presenting that information in a multiple choice format.

INTRODUCTION

Peter Pyle, and all those who assisted in creating the new identification guide (Pyle 1997), are to be commended. Many hours of research went into each study. Many new criteria, especially for age, have been added. Studying these new avian characteristics is both daunting and challenging.

The most common complaint of the guide I have heard (and personally experienced) is the format of its species accounts. Most of the people with whom I have discussed Pyle's book say that if accounts were presented using a dichotomous key format, as in Volume II of the *Bird Banding Manual* (CWS and USFWS 1977), the information might be much more accessible. With bird in hand, some have difficulty poring through the paragraphs of data, tracking what has and has not been viewed. Flipping pages between the accounts and various referenced figures is awkward occasionally. Finally, the manual's sheer size can be difficult to manage. Some people have split the book into two parts; others have photocopied only what is needed.

METHODS and RESULTS

I have attempted to customize Pyle's data for some of my most commonly encountered species to see if the criteria for age and sex could be presented in a format that approximates a dichotomous key.

In examining the format of age and sex criteria presented in Pyle (1997), some features of the information are readily apparent. For example:

1. Within a species account, the information for age or age/sex is generally similar. For example, an entry for primary coverts in the HY/SY data will almost always have a corresponding entry for AHY/ASY and beyond.

2. Species accounts will usually have either two, four, or eight separate sets of criteria to compare. Normally these sets represent HY/SY or AHY/ASY criteria, doubled when sexing is possible, doubled again for basic and alternate plumage. Other amounts may be present if other ages can be determined (SY/TY, ASY/ATY), or if a supplemental molt may be seen. The paragraphs are presented in the same order (basic then alternate plumage, HY/SY then AHY/ASY) in all accounts.

3. Current knowledge of timings for reliable aging and sexing are described well in the calendar chart for each species.

4. Species for which more study is needed are also described fairly well, usually in bold print.

It seems like an alternate format for presenting this information should be workable, especially some type of keyed format. The question becomes, what format to use? For me, an answer to this question happened quite by accident. I began by

choosing my ten most frequently encountered species and reviewing their entries in Pyle. I was preparing to use my meager knowledge of PC word processors to reformat a species account word by word when I found something most useful. Microsoft Works 4.0 software contains a multiple choice quiz format, which I adapted to my customization efforts (see below sample American Redstart as formatted by the word processor).This sample covers the main features and, hopefully, some advantages of the multiple choice layout.

Pyle-based American Redstart Worksheet

Band size (circle): 0A - 0

The following provides a different way of looking at the key provided in Pyle for American Redstarts (page 496). Most of the key uses an August to July "year," but note the odd timings for determining the bird's age!

1. ___ **Begin with the following check to age HY:**
   a. (Jun-Sep) If the following combination is true:
   a1. brownish upperparts, grayish underparts
   a2. two whitish-yellow wing bars
   If yes, **age HY sex U (unless rectrix yellow is an extreme) and stop.**

2. ___ **Are the outer primary coverts (pp covs, see Figure 138 on page 210):**
   a,c. narrow, tapered, abraded, pale brown w/ buff tips (when fresh)
   b,d. broad, truncate, fresh, dusky brown or black

3. ___ **Are the rectrices (rects; specifically r3, see Figure 275 on page 497):**
   a. abraded, washed brownish; r3 yellow reduced and dusky (275A-B)
   b. fresh, dusky; r3 yellow fairly large (275B-C)
   c. abraded, washed brownish; r3 yellow fairly large (275B-C)
   d. fresh; r3 black with orange

4. ___ **Looking at the upperparts and the throat, are they:**
   a,b. without black mottling
   c. with no (Aug-Apr) to some (Sep-Aug) black mottling
   d. black

5. ___ **Looking at the tertials, back and rump, do they fit:**
   a. terts brown, little or no olive edge; rump pale gray, no contrast w/ back
   b. terts *(and rump??)* dusky brown, usu. edged olive
   c. (*terts as in b above??*); rump dark gray, contrasting with paler back
   d. terts, rump and back black

6. ___ **Looking at the flanks and the underwing cov(ert)s, do they fit:**
   a. flanks lemon-yellow, little or no contrast with underwing covs
   b. flanks lemon- to orange-yellow, little or no contrast w/ underwing covs
   c. flanks orange-yellow to "salmon," often contrast with underwing covs
   d. flanks orange

7. ___ **Are the above answers:**
   a. (nearly) all **a**, then HY-F (Aug-Dec) or SY-F (Jan-Jul)
   b. (nearly) all **b**, then AHY-F (Jul-Dec) or ASY-F (Jan-Jul, doc Jul)
   c. (nearly) all **c**, HY-M (Sep-Dec) or SY-M (Jan-Aug, doc or AHY Aug)
   d. (nearly) all **d**, AHY-M (Jul-Dec) or ASY-M (Jan-Jul, doc in Jul)
   e. mixed (this is quite possible with **F** Mar-Jul), then age AHY (Jan-Sep) or U (Oct-Dec); sex **F** (a+b) or **M** (c+d) by above answers

AMRE (687.0) worksheet, page 1

The quiz format covers the four features mentioned above, but it does not replace the need for the guide itself. Figures and tables could not be reproduced but are referenced instead. As to each feature, plus some other features (both advantageous and not) of this style:

1. Each question indicates what criterion is being judged. For each question, a number of possible replies are presented. Each reply is based on an age or age/sex criterion in the species account. For each account, possible answers will appear in the same order as presented in the guide.

2. The order of the answers is always the same, because the order of the sets of criteria is always the same. Thus, for species with only HY/SY and AHY/ASY criteria, an answer of "a" is for the former and "b" for the latter. For both age and sex, generally "a" will be for HY/SY-F, "b" for AHY/ASY-F, "c" for HY/SY-M, and "d" for AHY/ASY-M. Supplemental plumage can normally be represented by answer "e", and so forth.

3. Aging and sexing of each bird then becomes a question of how many answers of "a," "b," etc., are seen. This provides a view of these criteria that is similar but not equivalent to the dichotomous key notation of the *Bird Banding Manual.* In most cases, the answers will be fairly obvious and the answers will be all one letter. Based on those answers, the common last question of the quiz corresponds as best it can to the calendar chart for the species.

4. If more study is needed for a species, these are noted in the final question entry for the species, as space allows.

5. The species accounts are designed to fit on a single page, although some are double-sided (other forms of customization may not be restricted in this way). In a few cases, so many criteria are given that separate sheets for basic and alternate plumage are needed. They are also designed to be used either singly as a reference sheet, or copied and filled out for individual birds. Enough blank space should exist on a page for extra notes, if necessary.

6. By putting all the choices for one criterion together, this may point out some omissions or shortcomings in the current data. For example, the key for American Redstart appears incomplete for both tertial and rump criteria.

7. Each choice for a question corresponds to a criterion mentioned in the guide. However, currently no provision exists (but could be easily added as an "Other:" describe choice) for cases where nothing matches.

8. In cases where the answers are strongly mixed (lots of "a" and "b," for example), an educated guess based on the calendar chart was made for age determination. In some cases, that guess may have been incorrect. In other cases where the answers should not be mixed (as when both HY and AHY birds can be determined with 95% certainty), the notation to recheck the bird appears.

It is hoped that this type of customization shows promise for field use, and could possibly be refined and adapted for use as a form of Cliff's Notes for Pyle's guide. This is, however, just one example of how the data presented in Pyle can be extracted as needed by the individual bander.

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