

## BOOK REVIEW

*Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. National Geographic Society. 1983. Available from National Geographic Society, Dep. 100, Washington, DC 20036. \$13.95 + 3.00 postage/handling.

Durably bound and well printed, this slightly larger than the back pocket field guide represents the collaboration of thirteen artists; four expert consultants (Jon L. Dunn, Eirik A. T. Blom, George E. Watson and John P. O'Neill); many writers, editors, and researchers; and their many helpful friends, all working under the sponsorship of the National Geographic Society. The result is 464 pages of pleasure and information, arranged in the popular format of range map and text on a page facing the appropriate plate.

The use of thirteen artists guarantees variety. Fortunately, a little over half the plates were done by H. Douglas Pratt, Diane Pierce, and Donald L. Malick, and while each hit trouble spots, the overall results are outstanding. Cynthia J. House (waterfowl) and Thomas R. Schultz (gulls and terns) handled those important groups well. The other eight artists contributed the remaining third, with plates ranging from poor to very good. Since most of the artists were assigned discrete groups, the juxtaposition of so many styles creates only a few problems. The most notable is in the shorebirds, where the use of four artists produces problems of scale, such as toy Surfbirds followed a page later by seemingly giant Dunlin.

One of the strongest features of this guide is that the artists were asked to illustrate much of the diversity of plumages which the birder will encounter. If you have seen one Fox or Song Sparrow, you have not seen them all; the extent of geographic variation is outlined by six races of each. Examples of types of variation in plumage covered by the guide are age (try the gulls), season (learn about male tanagers in winter), sex (see Bushtit and American Avocet), plumage wear (look at Hammond's Flycatcher), interbreeding (five Golden-winged x Blue-winged Warblers), color phases (Ross' Goose), and individual (see Lesser Goldfinch). Twenty-two figures of the four longspurs, fourteen of the three goldfinches, and seven of Common Tern are examples of the wealth of illustrative material largely unmatched by other guides.

While the breadth of coverage for each species is admirable, I feel that there is a mistaken emphasis on another type of "completeness"—the attempt to cover virtually every accidental. About 50 people a year go to Attu; the first printing of this guide is 250,000. Yes, this guide was helpful when I spent yesterday missing California's first Rustic Bunting (at least I knew what I was looking for), but an entire plate is devoted to four other species of old world buntings for which there are only about a dozen records for North America combined, all from Alaska. This is the same amount of space given to the five common small peeps. I know that many birders could benefit from a thorough treatment of the peeps; they don't get it here. Some of the space given to three figures of Red-throated Pipit (helps you sex the adults in breeding plumage) could have been used to show a second Sprague's Pipit, particularly one with fewer streaks on the breast and a richer color of buff.

The equality given to accidentals also leads to a visual confusion that will probably be particularly difficult for beginners. The Eurasian Kestrels dominate the plate for small falcons, the Asiatic eagles partly displace the American ones, and there are almost as many vagrant thrushes as native species. Everything is clearly labelled and the range maps (or the lack of one) will give a quick, general idea about distribution, but for the inexperienced there is a great deal to sort through; some alterations in layout would have helped. Most purchasers will appreciate all the accidentals, but, if a choice has to be made, virtually everyone might find an illustration of a dark Ferruginous Hawk (not included) more useful than that of the immature female Aplomado Falcon.

The text is the best of all the currently available field guides. Tucked away are many tips on identifying such difficult groups as female teal, dowitchers, small flycatchers, and sparrows. Comments include not only notes on plumage but also on calls and behavior, including gems on wing flicking and tail wagging in *Empidonax*, tail pumping in shrikes, and speed of bobbing in waterthrushes. If there is a problem with the text, it is that there should be more, and I mean that as both a compliment and a complaint. Too many pages end with room for extra lines, and there is much white space between the range maps. Given the importance of good text and compactness in a field guide, an artistic layout may be sacrificed for a merely functional one.

I also feel that the text lacked cohesive editing by a knowledgeable birder. Terms such as rare, casual and accidental are used inconsistently. In many cases, important problems of identification are not addressed. Separating female and young male Orchard and Hooded orioles rates only ten words; evidently female Scott's and Hooded are too dissimilar to warrant comment. Although not often a problem, how does one tell Crissal from California Thrasher? Red and Red-necked phalaropes are not easily told apart in flight in winter plumage; this problem is not addressed, and so the light gray back, whiter underwing, and broader white stripe on the upper wing of the Red are not mentioned, nor is the higher, squeakier call of the Red. Calls are given for Scarlet, Summer and Hepatic tanager; why is the call not given for Western (often rendered pit-er-ick)? Call and flight notes of warblers are valuable aids to identification. The call of Arctic Warbler is given, and its similarity to that of Dusky Warbler is mentioned. But you will find nothing about the metallic chink typical of Nashville, Virginia's and Lucy's warblers, or the distinctive zeep-zeep of a Worm-eating Warbler.

The maps accompanying the text are the least well executed major component of this guide. I suspect that there is considerable accuracy, particularly in the breeding ranges, but that accuracy is lost by the tiny size of the maps and the anemic yellow used for the breeding ranges. Most unfortunate was the decision not to show the main routes of migration; the system of cross hatching in the Golden Guide's *Birds of North America* may provoke quibbles, but imparts much information on routes in spring and fall. For instance, from the National Geographic guide it is difficult to determine which shorebirds are regular in the interior. For some birds a dashed line was used to indicate that migration occurs to the east of the line. While a step in the right direction, that line was not used often enough, and it just begs for another type of line to show the eastern border of more westerly birds (e.g. Townsend's Warbler); such a line could also have been used to show which typically eastern warblers are rare in Florida, something which is easily seen in the Golden Guide. The maps could have offered more information, but they will answer most "Should it be around here?" questions about breeding and wintering ranges. Most purchasers of this volume will rely on regional publications for detailed distributional information, so the problems with the maps will not detract greatly from the tremendous value of this volume.

More consistent editing of the text could also have helped with information on distribution. The text does helpfully mention the spring/fall routes of Hudsonian Godwit; the same could have been done for White-rumped Sandpiper or any of a number of other species. In turn, a number of comments about extralimital status could have been eliminated. "Very rare in south Florida" (Winter Wren) and "Rare vagrant to southern California during migration, chiefly in fall" (Grace's Warbler, less than 15 records, some from summer) are comments which do not seem necessary in a general field guide. In particular, there seems to be an unnecessary bias toward explaining the status of vagrants in California, when shorter, more general comments about the west as a whole would be more appropriate.

Leafing through the book, some of my specific cautions are about: winter loons, which should be ignored; most of the storm-petrels should not be trusted in terms of shape; cormorants have some gloss, but usually appear black, not green and purple; colors on many of the herons seem a bit exaggerated; and the ducks in flight are not

shown at a very useful angle—other guides do better. I was disappointed with the shorebirds, but I wouldn't refer you to any other guide first; Marbled Godwits are buffy like Long-billed Curlews; yellowlegs were named for a reason, although occasional individuals show legs as orange as here; the juvenile Long-billed Dowitcher looks like a bird from late October—birds from earlier in the fall are much rustier, although differing in pattern from young Short-billed, as explained in the text; juvenile Baird's Sandpipers are a rich buffy early in fall; Wilson's Phalaropes in winter are light gray, not dark gray above; the plates of shorebirds in flight should be trusted for little more than major features, such as the presence or absence of white rumps and wing stripes.

The twisted central tail feathers of Pomarine Jaegers are much longer than illustrated; as noted in the text, South Polar Skuas often show prominent gold on the nape; while the gulls are well aged, many birds labelled second winter (e.g. Herring and California gulls) would have been better illustrated with much grayer backs, rather than still in molt; the bill of Royal Tern seems a bit too long and slender; avoid most of the flycatchers, specifically the kingbirds (easier to tell than shown here; patterns on head and underparts more distinct), the *Myiarchus*, and the *Empidonax* (text and plumages not bad, but shapes way off); the wings on the swallows are much too broad, just as the wings on the swifts are too narrow; immature MacGillivray's Warblers have gray or whitish throats, not yellow; I like the sparrows both for the races and the habitat backgrounds, but keep an eye on the dimensions—species such as Harris' Sparrow are large sparrows; I would like a painting of Lark Bunting which has the long white panel along the edge of the wing; and young Bobolinks in fall are really quite bright yellow below, with strong head stripes.

I am aware that the tone of this review may seem negative. In part, I am frustrated because this guide is so well done, and yet could have been even better. I suspect that the exigencies of publishing led to some unfortunate haste, but outright errors are rare; many of my complaints are because I wanted more of the quality typical of this guide. I have listed a number of features which I disliked; I could have compiled a much longer and even more boring list of pitfalls which this guide avoided. My final two comments are: there is much for everyone, no matter how expert (just take a look at Red-legged Kittiwake or Bachman's Sparrow—did you know all that?), and when a friend of mine shows an interest in birds, this will be his or her first field guide.

RICHARD WEBSTER, P.O. Box 6318, San Diego, California 92106