

BOOK REVIEW

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The Marin County Breeding Bird Atlas—A Distributional and Natural History of Coastal California Birds. 1993. W. David Shuford. California Avifauna Series 1. Bushtit Books, P. O. Box 233, Bolinas, CA 94924. 479 pages. Softcover only. Price: \$24.95, plus \$3.50 shipping; California residents add \$1.81 sales tax. (A 20% discount is being offered on orders of 5 or more copies.)

The popularity of national and regional breeding bird atlases has grown steadily since the 1960s, and a number of California county atlas projects have been launched since the first one, started by Bob Stewart of Point Reyes Bird Observatory for Marin County, in 1976 (see Manolis, *W. Birds* 22:92–94, 1991, for a history of atlas efforts in the state). The publication of the Marin County atlas is thus a significant and long-awaited event in the annals of California field ornithology. Dave Shuford, who took up the Marin project in 1982 and has seen it to completion, has taken a great deal of gentle heat from those of us involved in county atlas projects, anxious to use the Marin results as a benchmark for our own. Well, here they are, awaiting our verdict, tempered by the knowledge that we will soon have to “put up or shut up” ourselves!

I think Dave, from the start, saw the atlas project as a frame upon which to elaborate a much broader vision, adequately summed up in the subtitle to his work. In his preface, he admits as much, noting his original intent to expand both the scope and detail of his supplementary material well beyond what could eventually be accommodated. The result is something more than a breeding bird atlas; indeed, it is a major reference on the birds of the central coast of California, crammed with more information bits per inch than many encyclopedias.

Shuford has done an admirable job of organizing a wealth of ecological information about his central theme, the distribution and breeding biology of Marin County's birds. An introductory section of about 40 pages provides a comprehensive and highly readable frame of reference, detailing Marin County geology and climate, plant communities, history of land use, and breeding phenology. Ten pages on methods follow, followed in turn by 20 pages of discussion of broad patterns of avifaunal composition and biogeography elucidated by the atlas work, culminating in a brief but useful section on conservation applications and identification of local species of special concern.

Most of the book is devoted, of course, to species accounts. One hundred sixty-three species are provided with individual accounts, with another 30 or so of “unclear” or potential breeding status receiving thumbnail sketches in a separate section. Each account consists of a map, a block of data summarizing the dispersion and relative abundance of the species as determined by atlas work, and accompanying text. The text section, which makes up the bulk of each account, is divided into sections on ecological requirements, Marin breeding distribution, and historical trends and population threats.

The maps themselves, although adequate, are perhaps the weakest element. They are small, taking up about a quarter of a page, yet crammed with details (major roads, reservoirs, bold atlas grid lines) that detract from and occasionally make it tricky to find or decipher the tiny symbols for breeding evidence. I urge those who might look to these maps as examples while producing their own atlases to remember that the most important elements on these maps are the symbols delineating the breeding distribution and status of bird species in the county. These symbols should dominate visually over the grid lines and geographic features (roads, rivers, etc.) by being big

and bold and, if possible, in a second color. The grid system and geographic features may best be even deleted from these maps.

The block of data beside each map includes the species' seasonal status, the percentage of grid blocks in which the species was recorded, in total and for each major level (possible, probable, and confirmed) of breeding evidence, a rating of "fine-scale abundance," and indices of overall population size, relative distribution, and confirmability of breeding. These data are calculated and presented slightly differently for colonial waterbirds than for other species.

Beyond the basics of atlasing—plotting the presence or absence of breeding evidence for each block in the grid—atlas projects in North America have varied considerably in the collection and presentation of data on relative abundance, dispersion, etc., of their breeding birds, if indeed they have presented any such data. Shuford has done a very admirable job of dealing with this aspect of the project by drawing from a limited data base and his own vast experience with the county's avifauna to develop his ratings and indices. As he points out, however, his fine-scale abundance rating (FSAR) "qualitatively defines the abundance of a species" and "may be off by plus or minus one (or more?) category." Caution is therefore essential in assigning significant meaning to absolute values of FSAR and the "overall population index," a function of the FSAR, or in attempting to extrapolate or compare these to similar ratings or indices used in other projects.

Most of each species account consists of text, and most of this discusses "ecological requirements." One hundred and fifty-three of these accounts are by Shuford, but a handful were written by regional experts on particular species. It is in this finely detailed, heavily referenced supplementary text that the book expands on the standard atlas format and proves worthy of a wide readership.

Of course, these accounts vary in detail. Species like the Yellow-breasted Chat, a sparse breeder on the margin of its range in Marin County, are subjects of little more than thumbnail sketches. Many common breeding birds of coastal northern California, however, have been intensively studied by staff biologists at Point Reyes Bird Observatory over the years, and Shuford ably summarizes the results of these efforts and the research of others. Similarly, the discussion of historical trends and population threats for each species goes far beyond the boundaries of Marin, encompassing all of California with special emphasis on the central coast.

Tucked away in the back of the book are three appendices with much interesting information, particularly the table of raw data from 10-year's worth of Spring Bird Counts (patterned after Christmas Bird Counts) conducted in Marin County from 1977 to 1987.

Illustrations by Ane Rovetta and Keith Hansen add considerable charm to this book, and Ian Tait's photos are as informative as they are beautiful. The frequently haphazard distribution of photos and sketches, however, is a minor annoyance (e.g., a photo of a Yellow Warbler is four pages and two species' accounts removed from the text for the Yellow Warbler, and a wonderful full-page photo of a Wrentit at the nest fronts the account for the Northern Mockingbird instead of the preceding text for the Wrentit).

The typographical errors inevitable in a volume of this size are few and of little consequence. Production values seem high for a soft-cover volume of this size, and acid-free, recycled paper is used. In summary, aside from the poor treatment of some visual elements, this is a well-crafted book and a fine breeding bird atlas, but these descriptions do not do justice to its full value. Because it contains an enormous amount of information on California's birds, thoughtfully presented in an easily digested form, *The Marin County Breeding Bird Atlas* belongs on every western field ornithologist's bookshelf.

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