

BOOK REVIEWS

The National Geographic Society Field Guide to the Birds of North America (consultants Jon L. Dunn, Jonathan K. Alderfer, and Paul E. Lehman). 1999. National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C. 480 pages, including approx. 220 pages of full-color plates, maps for most species. Paper, \$21.95. ISBN 0-7922-7451-2.

The National Geographic Society (NGS) guide is widely regarded as the most comprehensive field guide to North American birds. Its meat is concise text and facing-page color illustrations for all but the rarest vagrant species recorded from North America, i.e., north of the Mexican border. The first edition appeared in 1983, the second in 1987, and now we have the third. One or both of the earlier editions are probably familiar to most readers, so this review concentrates on the changes in the third edition (hereafter NG3). Of note is that 80 species have been added, as a result of new records, newly established feral populations, and taxonomic splits, while a few species (failed introductions of non-native species) have been deleted.

On looking through NG3, I inferred that its production had been rushed. I learned subsequently that the consultants and many NGS staff lobbied for another year in which to complete this revision, but top NGS executives overruled this to make time for more "important" plans for the year 2000. It is sad that some care so little for the market at which a book is aimed, and that financial gain and prestige supersede quality. Despite this, NG3 is a good field guide, but it could have been much better, especially with respect to the illustrations, upon which so many of us rely. For example, there was no time to show multiple races of the Dunlin (specimens had been picked out), and many artists had to work to unrealistic deadlines. Even the best artists cannot produce great work with too little time.

Beyond a sense that it had been rushed, the first thing I noticed in NG3 was that the species accounts follow AOU taxonomic sequence much more closely than in the second edition. Now at least I have a good chance of finding the tanagers or quail where I'd expect them, and after I adapt to the latest classification I should be able to find the crows and vireos. To many birders, taxonomic arrangement may seem esoteric, but to others, a standardized sequence is useful, facilitating reference to multiple publications, and I am glad to see that NG3 has been changed in this way.

The introduction to NG3 is expanded, with more details on bird topography, molt and plumage sequence, plumage variation, and how to identify birds in the field. I found this revamped introduction an improvement, although I did note two points that could be corrected in a second printing: under the discussion of scientific names, the subspecies *fasciatus* of Three-toed Woodpecker is described as an intermediate species, and in the plumage-sequence section birds are reportedly *born* naked, rather than hatched. Oddly, much of the introduction seems directed at beginning or intermediate-level birders, yet the remainder of the book appears not to be produced with this audience in mind.

The species accounts are a model of information condensation, and the newly added boldface text helps highlight points such as age or sex differences, voice, and range. I found no species account that remained unaltered. Changes relate to all aspects of the text, from new descriptions of calls (e.g., Xantus' versus Craven's murrelets) to discussion of "new" field marks (e.g., wing-tip shape of Black-chinned versus Ruby-throated hummingbirds) to updated range information (e.g., Black Swift now thought to winter in South America). Geographic variation receives more coverage, with some conspicuously distinct subspecies being featured, as in the Chestnut-backed Chickadee or the greatly expanded accounts of the Eastern and Spotted towhees. Inevitably, some changes that could have happened didn't: the Northern Goshawk still "preys chiefly on birds and ducks," while the Western Tanager remains mute, apparently, even though the Flame-colored has a "song similar to

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Western Tanager.” The second edition noted that the Dusky-capped Flycatcher was formerly called the Olivaceous Flycatcher; similarly, “formerly called Mexican Crow” would have been helpful in the new Tamaulipas Crow account. These are minor points, however, in what has been a huge amount of work. New information is packed in, and the text alone makes the third edition worth getting even if you have the second.

The maps have been revised thoroughly, and reddish and purple shading replace yellow and green for summer and resident distributions, respectively. While these colors may be less “intuitive” they show up far better, which, with a larger scale for many maps, is another plus of NG3 over its predecessors. For example, notice the breeding outposts for the Gray, Dusky, and Willow flycatchers, none of which would have been discernable even had they been included in the second edition. Conversely, however, winter ranges are now shown in a paler blue than in the second edition. This means one has to strain to discern the coastal winter ranges of many shorebirds—a darker blue would be much better. While I’m sure some readers will find errors here and there, I was impressed with the maps’ accuracy. They show almost too much detail for the scales employed! Distributional information in the text has also been updated meticulously, including such oddball records as the Red-flanked Bluetail from the Farallon Islands, even one as recent as the Olive-backed Pipit. Strangely, though, California records of the Arctic Warbler were not mentioned.

What about the plates? Many are new. A close look reveals great variation in the printing among different plates (indeed, within some plates) and that many of the individual older paintings have been subtly altered and/or moved around on a plate. The plates, I suspect, are what will draw the most criticism, but some of this criticism should not be directed at the artists. At least in the copies I have seen, many illustrations carried over from the second edition have been printed far too dark and show an imbalance of pigmentation. Conversely, many of the newly added illustrations are much better, although some are rather washed out, e.g., those of the *Catharus* thrushes. Confounding our expectations in the digital age, color printing remains an analog craft ill adapted to mass production. There is a big and increasing market for bird books, at least in North America (over a million copies of the NGS field guides have been printed), but apparently the publishers were unconcerned about producing a field guide whose color reproduction is, quite frankly, substandard. Presumably, deadlines compromised quality.

The choice of which illustrations to redo and which to leave must have been extremely difficult. New plates that stand out as excellent include those of the loons, golden-plovers, phalaropes, and *Empidonax* flycatchers (except for subspecies *brewsteri* of the Willow). Other great improvements are in the swifts and *Catharus* thrushes. Some new plates, however, are less successful than others, e.g., those of the *Myiarchus* flycatchers or the thrashers. Amazingly, the small gorgeted hummingbirds were not replaced, yet the plate of *Piranga* tanagers was repainted—surely not the best allocation of resources. Striking style differences show in some plates where different artists’ work has been combined. Generally this does not affect identification—although the new “dwarf morph” Wedge-tailed Shearwaters look odd in comparison with the old “giant” Flesh-footed Shearwater. The scale is awry within other plates, e.g., the Common Raven is still a giant among crows (and the angle of the Chihuahuan Raven’s bill does not lend itself to appreciation of the length of the diagnostic rictal bristles). One could go on about this and that, but in general the plates are good to excellent, particularly when used in tandem with the text. Still, I can’t help but feel that more resources should have been made available for revising the plates: more could and should have been recommissioned.

So, what are the alternatives? The NGS guide is good for more advanced birders, but for a growing majority of beginning and intermediate-level birders it has too much detail, too much emphasis on rarities and vagrants. For example, two new plates of

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Siberian flycatchers and small Old World thrushes (Wheatear, etc.) are beautiful additions, but expanded coverage of plumage variation in the newly split Solitary Vireo complex would have been infinitely more useful for 99% or more of potential users. Alternatively, take a look at some new plates. The Mourning and White-winged doves are lost among a mass of vagrants and exotics (checking the maps helps narrow down choices in such cases). Among the albatrosses, images of the two regularly occurring species (Black-footed and Laysan) are tiny, while most of the next plate is devoted to large images of two vagrant albatrosses. It is nice to have information on all of these species, but for many birders such comprehensiveness may not equate to comprehension. Instead, the recent albeit misnamed American Bird Conservancy's field guide to *All the Birds* (despite some poor plates) or the last (1994) Golden Guide for eastern North America (with plates by Jim Coe that are among the best ever painted of many North American birds) may be more useful and user-friendly to many birders. In addition, for all but the most widely traveled and vagrant-oriented birders, David Sibley's forthcoming North American field guide (due in 2000) should relegate NG3 to a lower ranking. Had NGS taken more time with its revision this might not have been the case.

When it first appeared, the NGS guide was an ambitious undertaking. It has improved with each revision, and the most serious birders will want NG3. Greater consistency in the illustrations and their printing, more attention to some of the commoner species, and perhaps a layout that more easily distinguishes vagrants from regular species would be things to consider in future editions, or in any other North American guide. Despite some misgivings, I consider NG3 an excellent guide and am glad it exists. I recommend it for its wealth of information, its up-to-date distributional data, and the relatively comprehensive level of plumages it illustrates.

Steve N. G. Howell

Habitat Characteristics of Some Passerine Birds in Western North American Taiga, by Brina Kessel, 1998. University of Alaska Press. 120 pages, 9 color plates, 13 black and white photos. Paper, \$16.95. ISBN 0-912006-98-6.

This short monograph is a welcome contribution to the study of Alaska ornithology, particularly since so little information has been published on use of habitats by passerines in the region. The title is misleading, through, for the book is not a comprehensive treatise on habitats across western North American taiga. Rather, it reports primarily on the results of a two-summer study of a single drainage in central Alaska. The information is augmented by comparisons with earlier studies by the author and other ornithologists from different sites in Alaska. Nonetheless, considering the paucity of data on this group of birds in Alaska, the work constitutes a valuable reference and review of current information on passerine breeding habitats in Alaska's taiga.

Taiga is defined as the subarctic forested region of the northern hemisphere, encompassing not only forests but also the mosaic of open woodlands, shrublands, wetlands, bogs, and alpine tundra within the forested zone. The author takes a Grinnellian approach to identifying the major environmental factors that help define the species-specific niches of taiga birds in Alaska. In her study, she censused breeding birds on twelve 10-ha plots selected to represent fairly homogeneous tracts of each of the major habitats described for Alaska's taiga. She systematically measured the characteristics and vegetation of each plot in detail, then used correlation and cluster analysis to discern relationships between breeding densities of selected passerines and characteristics of the various habitat types.

The format of the book is a hybrid between a traditional scientific research publication and a less formal overview, perhaps in order to appeal to a broader