

BOOK REVIEW

Birding in the American West: A Handbook, by Kevin J. Zimmer. 2000. Cornell Univ. Press. 402 pages, scattered black-and-white line drawings and photographs. Paperback, \$25. ISBN 0-8014-8328-X.

Some readers may remember a book entitled *The Western Birdwatcher*, by the same author and published in 1985. For some reason that book never made it "big," but it was regarded by many as a very useful work. *Birding in the American West* (hereafter BAW) is essentially an updated and expanded version of *The Western Birdwatcher*, and I hope it reaches a larger market, for it contains much of value. The geographic scope of BAW is vast and comprises the "western" United States from the eastern boundaries of the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas westward, including Alaska. Canada is not included, so the title is a political misnomer. BAW comprises five chapters, plus a single appendix, a bibliography, and an index.

Chapter 1 is a concise discussion of techniques that can help in finding any bird species, not simply in the West. These include habitat recognition, elevation, key plant species, seasonality, time of day, bird hotlines, recommendations for pelagic trips, taping, and ethics. Chapter 2 overviews subjects that help in field identification, including structure and behavior, molt and plumage, vocalizations, the importance of preparation, and the dangers of psychological influences—how to recognize the "I wouldn't have seen it if I hadn't believed it" syndrome. A summary of key characters for different groups (shearwaters, kingbirds, vireos, etc.) is provided, with subjective judgment of the degree of identification difficulty within each group. Chapter 3 is a short discussion of why one should keep a journal, with suggestions for format and tips on how not to fall behind in keeping notes. Chapter 4 covers a selection of "difficult identifications beyond the field guides," and Chapter 5 suggests where and when to find a selection of what the author terms "western specialties," ranging from resident breeding species to rare migrants and vagrants.

I recommend the first three chapters to all birders. Certain points will be obvious to some readers, others less so, but I suggest any birder could benefit from the information in these chapters. As is often the case, a review of a few general principles can help more than trying to memorize hundreds of miscellaneous facts, and Zimmer does a good job of conveying the basic principles. For example, the key characters for groups (pp. 48–57) are very useful, although stating that swallow identification is "straightforward" is at odds with Chapter 4 (p. 228), where, more realistically, swallows "frequently present identification problems for birders." My attention was drawn to two points (one ethical, one factual) in the first two chapters. Although Zimmer's discussion of playing tapes to attract birds has some tips on how to use this technique while minimizing disturbance to the bird, he (p. 24) offers only two alternatives: disturb the bird with tape, or disturb the bird with chasing it and trampling its habitat. The very simple alternative of not disturbing a bird in either way could have been mentioned—for those with more concern for the bird's welfare than for their own list. "Heard birds" count as much on your life list as "seen birds" (this is in the American Birding Association's listing rules where it was introduced with the primary concern of reducing potential pressure and disturbance to birds). The second point is that the section on molt and plumage sequence (pp. 40–42) is the worst I have seen—any second printing should correct this section, or it should be deleted. For example, alternate plumage is attained *only* through a prealternate molt, *not* through wear as claimed, and attempts to explain duck molt (p. 41) and tern molt (p. 181) are replete with egregious errors of commission (correcting them here would take too much space). Fortunately the rest of the book is much better.

Chapters 4 and 5 will be of most use for birders living in or visiting western North America, although some identification problems have wider relevance. Chapter 4 is a compilation that should be valuable for beginning and intermediate-level birders. Most

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of the subjects have been discussed elsewhere, but information is conveyed here with a different perspective that is always useful. The species treated range from loons and swans to *Empidonax* flycatchers and *Carpodacus* finches, with frequent reference to original articles. Most relevant references through 1996 are cited, but some from 1997 and 1998 were overlooked; e.g., Dunn and Beadle's (1998) important article on longspurs (*Birders' Journal* 7:68-93). The chapter is illustrated by a number of attractive and informative original line drawings (mainly by Shawneen Finnegan) and by black-and-white photographs of variable quality, most of which are dated (dates should be mandatory for identification-related photographs). Black-and-white photographs have limited utility in this field, and I advocate color for future editions. For example, Figure 4.40 apparently shows a juvenile Semipalmated Sandpiper, but I doubt the photo will help readers resolve this common identification dilemma. In-depth treatment of many difficult identifications is avoided, and examples of relevant problems not covered include the Cliff and Cave swallows and the White and Black-backed wagtails. Some misconceptions are perpetuated (e.g., the dark eyes of "northern" Western Gulls), and the text is at times contradictory (jaegers show "no known consistent sexual dimorphisms" on p.141, yet Figure 4.49 is identified as a male Pomarine). Nonetheless, this chapter should bring many important identification points to a wider audience and serves as a useful reference for more experienced birders.

Chapter 5 concentrates on where and when one can find the "western specialties," a rather loose term given the geographic coverage. For example, it covers the Roseate Spoonbill (it occurs on the Gulf coast of Texas)! This chapter is an excellent synthesis of seasonal, geographical, behavioral, and habitat-related factors that one should consider when seeking a given species. Regional bird-finding guides that offer more detail are often referenced. "Specialties" covered range from the Streaked Shearwater to the Brant, and a second edition could save space by paring down this scope. More information is better than less, however, and Zimmer provides an invaluable summary for any birder living in or visiting the western U.S.

An appendix lists species mentioned in the text (in AOU 1998 sequence, with scientific names), and the rather idiosyncratic index includes common and scientific names for some but not all species; e.g., the genera *Junco* and *Tyrannus* are omitted.

It is obvious that BAW covers a multitude of topics and, given the huge subject matter, two questions come to mind. Does this book try to do too much? How much information is in it that you can't find elsewhere? One could argue that the answers are "yes" and "none," respectively, but I believe that BAW brings together a wealth of information in very readable format and it deserves a well-earned place on the bookshelf of a western birdwatcher.

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