

BOOK REVIEWS

The Shorebird Guide, by Michael O'Brien, Richard Crossley, and Kevin Karlson. 2006. Houghton Mifflin Company. 490 pages, 870 color photos. Paperback \$24.95 (ISBN 0-618-43294-9).

Shorebirds are popular, and three new shorebird identification guides have appeared in the last year or so: this work, Message and Taylor's *Shorebirds of North America, Europe, and Asia* (reviewed below), and Paulson's *Shorebirds of North America* (reviewed in *Western Birds* 36:275–276, 2005). You may well ask, "Do we need all of these guides? Which one(s) should I buy?" The answer depends on what you want. Let's take a look at *The Shorebird Guide*.

Birds in life rarely look like "the picture in the book," no matter how good that picture is, be it a painted illustration or photo. So this excellent photo-driven guide focuses on identifying shorebirds as one sees them in the field—by using size, structure, behavior, and general color patterns—rather than by fine-level plumage details (although these are also noted). It's an approach different from that of most field guides, but it's the way by which experienced birders identify much of what they see. The authors' premise is that identification can be made easier by looking at those features that are least variable yet most visible in the field. Learning to see the whole as being composed of more than its constituent parts is an approach that we all use to some degree, and *The Shorebird Guide* aims to hone this inherent capability. It's a worthy goal, but not one easy to achieve. The preface outlines this approach, then come acknowledgments, introduction, 293 pages of color "species photos" (with range maps and brief text), and the species accounts; the book ends with an appendix, glossary, short bibliography, photo credits, and index. Species names for both photos and text are given at the bottom of each page, making it easy to flip through and find something.

The thoughtful 22-page introduction puts shorebirds in a taxonomic context, briefly notes migration and conservation issues, and then discusses how to identify shorebirds. Pointers for evaluating and describing relative size, structure, behavior, general color patterns, voice, and plumage details are followed by caveats about lighting conditions, variation, and the importance of probability. Shorebird topography is dealt with by means of three labeled photos. Given the importance of understanding the various groups of feathers, this section is too brief and is not helped by some misleading labels (e.g., for the median coverts); at the very least the user should be referred to the glossary for explanations of terms. The glossary, however, refers to upper and lower rows of scapulars, which might better be called bands, or simply upper and lower scapulars, given that the scapulars originate from a single strip or patch and fan out rather like stalks of different lengths in a vase of flowers. Molt and age determination are explained clearly, using photos of the Western Sandpiper and Greater Yellowlegs to illustrate seasonal changes in appearance; the familiar life-year terms such as breeding adult, first winter, etc., are used for plumages in favor of more technical (and less field-friendly) terms such as definitive alternate, formative, etc. This is a good decision, given how often I see birders mistakenly describe sandpipers in first alternate plumage as being in basic plumage simply because they are in a dull plumage. Following the introduction come four pages that explain how to use *The Shorebird Guide*.

The species photos start with 47 "domestic species," then come 44 "rarities and regional specialties" (e.g., the Bar-tailed Godwit and Red-necked Stint), and finally five instructive pages showing presumed hybrids. Divvying up the species in this way may be more helpful for beginners (at least those living outside western Alaska), but it took me a while to get used to looking in different places for related species. The species accounts, by contrast, have all species together in taxonomic sequence. Photos are the crux of this guide and overall they are superb, well chosen, and well reproduced. They combine utility and aesthetics and range from small (but identifiable) images of

BOOK REVIEWS

the relevant species, often with other species for comparison, to full-page photos that help evoke the magic and beauty of shorebirds, such as ones of the American Avocet (p. 77) and a “rush” of Red Knots and Ruddy Turnstones (p. 138). The photos of “domestic” species start with a “character photo” showing each species in some typical pose or setting, and all species progress from juvenile to adult with accompanying captions that highlight characters for age and species determination. Rarities have fewer photos (and shorter species accounts), which makes sense given that most users won’t see (let alone find) rare shorebirds.

Many photos show two or more species (not always other shorebirds), which replicates real-life birding and is also helpful for appreciating relative size and structure. Taken together the photos give an excellent feel for each species, which would not be the case if only portraits were used. All “other” species in each photo (even those out of focus in the background) are identified, the only exceptions I found being the juvenile Laughing Gull flying in photo 20 on p. 200 and the background Stilt Sandpiper in photo 9 on p. 197. The photos do not necessarily cover the range of plumage variation for each age group (e.g., as in first-summer Black-bellied Plovers, which range in appearance from nonbreeding to full breeding plumage), but the species accounts do note these variations. A nice touch, characteristic of the book’s teaching approach, is the regular inclusion of quizzes asking the reader to identify the species or age of birds shown (answers, with explanations, are in the appendix). Making people think by answering questions on the basis of information just presented is a great way to promote learning. Simply scanning captions may not lead to absorbing information.

Perhaps inevitably with so many photos, there are minor errors and glitches. For example, in photo 3, p. 51, the juvenile is on the left, not right. The “molting adult” Surf-bird in April (photo 5, p. 132) is in its first spring (note the relatively brown and pointed primaries), but the caption says “mostly worn breeding [plumage],” so something is amiss. The “nonbreeding” Little Ringed Plover (photo 5, p. 242) is a juvenile. An unfortunate typo is that for the juvenile Black Turnstone (p. 128), which was photographed in early September, not November (this species molts out of juvenal plumage quickly and is difficult to age in the field by early winter). The only species-level misidentification I found was of the Black-headed (not Little) Gulls in the background of photo 1, p. 227. Notable omissions from the photos are subspecies *frazari* of the American Oystercatcher and the juvenile Bristle-thighed Curlew.

At the start of each species’ photo section is a range map and a short text indicating size (including helpful comparisons to other species, e.g., the Buff-breasted Sandpiper is “same as a small Pectoral Sandpiper”), structure (often with comparison to similar species), behavior (including habitat), and a précis of status in North America. These notes, taken with the photos and captions, should allow all species to be identified. One could disagree with little points, such as the legs of Snowy Plovers reportedly being only occasionally tinged pinkish (they usually look tinged pinkish, at least in California). The maps, which come at the start of each species’ photo section, are taken from the Kaufmann *Focus Guide to Birds of North America* and are not always accurate or up to date. For example, the recent breeding of the Mountain Plover in northeastern Mexico is not mapped (albeit outside the book’s geographic scope), and the breeding of the Black-necked Stilt and the marked spring passage of the Whimbrel and Hudsonian Godwit in south-central Alberta (Ray Wershler pers. comm.) are not indicated.

The species accounts cover status, taxonomy, behavior (including habitat), migration, molt, and vocalizations. These accounts are intended as identification-related information to supplement that provided in the photographic section and are generally sound and well-written, but I lament the lack of literature citations. The behavior section gives such information on breeding as timing, number of broods, and fledging dates (eggs are not described), as well as feeding behavior and both breeding and nonbreeding habitats. Given the depth of these accounts I found some surprising omissions. For

BOOK REVIEWS

example, no mention is made of the frequent occurrence (at least along the Pacific coast) of Whimbrels feeding and roosting on rocky coastlines, and the distinctive species-specific feeding habits of the Snowy, Wilson's, and Semipalmated plovers are not described, although the birds' spacing and manner of foraging can be used to identify each species at long range. The nesting season given for the Collared Plover in Mexico (August to November; no references) is at odds with published and unpublished data for nests and young of which I am aware, April–July and November–December, and mentioning putative seasonal abundance shifts for this species in Chile without references is unhelpful. The migration section details spring and fall dates in different regions and distinguishes between the schedules of adults and juveniles in fall. I'm sure careful observers will find discrepancies for their own regions; for example, the first juvenile Semiplamated Plovers reportedly arrive in the northern tier of states in mid August, yet they appear regularly in central California by late July (pers. obs.), and photo 3 on p. 51 shows a juvenile in late July in New York. But overall this is excellent (if unreferenced) information very helpful for identification.

The accounts for the timing and extent of molts, and whether they occur on breeding, stopover, or nonbreeding grounds, are written clearly and logically, following a bird from juvenal into adult plumage. A careful reading, however, reveals not infrequent errors about timing and extent of molt, and the lack of citations leaves the user nowhere to follow up. For example, Mountain Plovers have a variable preformative molt (P. Pyle and S. N. G. Howell unpubl. data) rather than lacking one, as *The Shorebird Guide* states. And adult western Willets are still undergoing primary molt in northern Chile (not acknowledged as part of their winter range) in mid November (pers. obs.) even though *The Shorebird Guide* reports this molt being completed by early September.

All in all, though, my criticisms of this work are of the inevitable nit-picky kind, and the authors have provided a superb overview of North American shorebird identification that will benefit beginner and expert alike. Put simply, this is a must-have volume for anyone interested in shorebirds.

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