

BOOK REVIEWS

Shorebirds of North America, Europe, and Asia, by Stephen Message and Don Taylor. 2005. Princeton University Press. 224 pages, 77 color plates. Paperback \$35 (ISBN 0-691-12672-0).

This work (hereafter *Shorebirds*) was first published in the U.K by Helm with the more honest title *Waders of Europe, Asia, and North America*. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, repeating complaints from some of my past reviews, I must say that the author and artist are not overly familiar with North American species or literature. Yet this has not prevented a commercially oriented make-over of the cover and title. *Shorebirds* is built around a large number of color plates attractively painted by Message and is intended to aid with field identification. A quite lengthy introduction covers structure, plumage, molt, and behavior, with tips on how to identify species in flight. Then come 45 plates of standing shorebirds, 42 of regularly occurring species and three of vagrants, followed by 32 plates of flying shorebirds. The intent was to allow comparison of birds at rest and in flight, with similar species grouped together (species deemed similar at rest are not always the same as those similar in flight, hence species in the two sets of plates are not in the same sequence). Facing-page text for the plates of standing shorebirds covers key identification marks, behavior, habitat, plumages, geographic variation, and a discussion of confusing species. Facing-page text for flying birds also includes voice and distribution, and this is where the color range maps are placed. The maps are taken from volume three of the *Handbook of Birds of the World* and, by virtue of their scale, give only a very broad-brush idea of distribution.

Plates are the meat of any identification guide. Those of standing birds are well designed, with good use of space and similar species shown in comparable postures. However, everyone to whom I have shown the plates has immediately commented something like "wow, these birds look fat!" Furthermore, the bills and legs of many species look too short and thick, heightening the sense of atypically compact birds. The paintings do not convey the subtleties of many North American species (e.g., the Buff-breasted Sandpiper), and some are notably flat and lifeless (e.g., the Baird's and White-rumped sandpipers). And the scapulars of the *Calidris* sandpipers, among others, look like rows of bricks rather than showing evidence of originating from a compact patch. Although all of this does not detract too much from utility for identification, lifelike illustrations would be preferable to caricatures. Plumage details are accurately portrayed for most species, one exception being the "first-winter" Collared Plover, which in reality has a complete black breast band and is barely distinguishable from an adult; the text more accurately implies that the chest patches are a briefly held juvenile character. The in-flight paintings are often a little awkwardly proportioned, but they work for identification.

The introduction is quite thorough, although fact-checking, copy-editing, and proof-reading were far from perfect. For example, on p. 15, the orbital ring is correctly labeled as naked skin, but, on p. 38, the Black Oystercatcher is said to have a red eye-ring, implying red feathers. On p. 17, the Semipalmated Plover's foot is attributed to the Semipalmated Sandpiper; on p. 20, the inner (not outer) primaries are molted on the breeding grounds; on p. 22, only coursers and pratincoles supposedly have a complete "post-juvenile" molt, even though many long-distance migrants, such as the American Golden Plover and Baird's Sandpiper, also have complete post-juvenile (= preformative) molts, and so on.

The text facing the plates is generally good, but the decision about plate and text division for resting and flying birds leads to problems, as under the Little Stint (p. 104), whose voice is not mentioned as an important identification criterion relative to similar species such as the Semipalmated Sandpiper. Male and female Dunlins are painted, but the text does not explain sexual plumage differences (and whether these apply to all subspecies), yet it does offer plumage descriptions that are needlessly detailed for species-level identification. The Wandering Tattler is said to be "larger" than a Surfbird (p. 96), but, although a tattler may be longer, a Surfbird is bigger

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bodied and bulkier and does not look smaller when the two species are together (e.g., photo 4 on p. 100 of *The Shorebird Guide*). This and other statements reflect a general weakness with respect to New World species. For example, vagrants of the Greater Sandplover and Upland Sandpiper but not the Bristle-thighed Curlew are mentioned from California.

Shorebirds is aimed at beginning to intermediate-level birders, but because it includes all holarctic species there is a lot of extraneous material that will only clutter the picture for such users, who presumably live either in North America or in Eurasia. Beginners in North America are better off with the Stokes' *Beginner's Guide to Shorebirds* (2001, Little, Brown and Company), which is well-conceived and clearly laid out for that audience. The *Sibley Guide* is easier to use and better for any level of birder. For those wanting more details on rarities, Paulson's photographic guide would be the book of choice, and for an overview of how to approach shorebird identification, *The Shorebird Guide* by O'Brien et al. is an obvious winner. While I appreciate the intent of *Shorebirds*, the timing of its publication is unfortunate, appearing within a year of two better guides written by people who live in North America. It may sell better in Europe, which was the original market.

In conclusion, *Shorebirds* is a nice book but perhaps superfluous, and its vast geographic scope is self-defeating for beginners. It offers another view on shorebird identification, which is always helpful, but books much better for New World shorebirds are available, and they also cost less.

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