

BOOK REVIEWS

Tanagers, Cardinals, and Finches of the United States and Canada: The Photographic Guide, by David Beadle and J. D. Rising. 2006. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ. 196 pages, 200 photographs, 30 range maps. Paperback, \$29.95. ISBN-13: 978-0-691-11858-1.

Guides treating specific groups of birds have popped up left and right recently. *Tanagers, Cardinals and Finches of the United States and Canada* (hereafter *Tanagers, Cardinals, and Finches*) is one of the first examples in which smaller groups are lumped together and treated in one guide. This aggregation of popular and often brightly colored birds includes many identification challenges, such as redpolls, female-type buntings, and various populations of the Red Crossbill. A critical, modern-style treatment of these subjects would be welcome—is this book it?

Tanagers, Cardinals and Finches includes exactly 200 photographs, covering 46 species, which breaks down to five or six photos for regularly occurring species and one or two for species designated as “extralimital.” This number is inadequate in many cases, especially for extralimital species, which often do not have a photo portraying each sex. While many of the photographs are excellent, a stated goal of *Tanagers, Cardinals, and Finches* (p. 1) is to “illustrate as many different plumages of these species as space and the availability of photos permit.” Clearly space did not limit the Crimson-collared Grosbeak account to include only a single photo, of a female, because the bottom half of the page is blank. A fall or winter male Lawrence’s Goldfinch, more than one photo of subspecies *psaltria* of the Lesser Goldfinch, and a second female House Finch also would have been preferable to half-blank pages.

The brief introduction covers most of the basics but is somewhat marred by poor copy editing. Most obvious is the omission of Blue Grosbeak from the genus *Passerina*. Species accounts include the standard headers: Measurements, Habitat, Behavior, Voice, Similar species, Geographic variation, Distribution, Conservation status, Molt, Description, Hybrids, and References. While this range of topics is broad, the information in each section seems to be little more than a boiled-down version of the *Birds of North America* accounts. The vocal descriptions exemplify my feelings about the text in general: often incomplete and sometimes misleading. In several instances calls, such as the frequently given flight calls of the Blue Grosbeak and Painted Bunting, are not included. Geographic variation in vocalizations is not addressed in the American Goldfinch, Pine Grosbeak, and Purple Finch, among others.

Structural characteristics are usually noted in the first photo caption for each species. While I applaud the authors for making an effort to discuss structure, placing this information in the text also would have been helpful. Unfortunately, this is only a minor example of how the plates and text seem to have been produced in isolation. One of the weakest points of this guide is the attempt to apply molt and plumage terminology, which is often inconsistent between accounts and plate captions and results in a great deal of confusion. For the Rose-breasted Grosbeak, for example, a “first alternate male” is pictured, but this plumage is omitted from the species account. There is, however, a description of “first-winter males,” yet the photograph of this plumage is labeled “first basic.” All of the photos are labeled using terms like “definitive basic” and “first basic,” but descriptions in the text are often of “adult” or “first-winter” plumages. These terms are ostensibly equivalent, but confusion could have been avoided by using one set of terms consistently. Instead of applying a strict Humphrey–Parkes terminology inconsistently, the authors would have done better to use terms such “first year,” which are more easily understood by a wider audience.

The inconsistency can also be misleading, as in the Hoary Redpoll account. This species undergoes only one molt per year, but photo 36.3 is labeled as a “breeding female,” while 36.4 is a “basic female.” This might lead readers to believe there are

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two molts and plumages, which can be distinguished, but in fact both photos show the basic plumage; the only distinction is a difference in feather wear. On p. 106 we are told that the Brown-capped Rosy-Finch lacks a prealternate molt, but the rosy-finch in photo 27.2 is labeled as “definitive alternate.” Similar mistakes apply to the Evening Grosbeak, Lesser Goldfinch, and Hepatic Tanager.

The text in general references surprisingly few sources. There are several instances where a search for recent literature (such as papers published after the *Birds of North America* accounts) would have prevented inaccuracies. Accounts are therefore littered with minor errors and fail to include much relevant information. For example, Willoughby et al. (2002) concluded that Lawrence’s Goldfinch lacks a prealternate molt, and Butler et al. (2002) described a molt-migration by adult Western Tanagers. In the Red-legged Honeycreeper account, molt timing is incorrect for Mexico: males reportedly molt into a dull female-like plumage in June, but the photo taken in Chiapas, Mexico, in June is of a stunning male with no indication of active molt; males usually molt later, and this dull plumage is seen from August to February (Howell and Webb 1995). Furthermore, the text (p.34) states that the Red-legged Honeycreeper “may be the only tropical passerine to have such an eclipse plumage.” This “eclipse” plumage is not included in the description, however, and it is well-known that other neotropical passerines, such as the Blue-black Grassquit and some *Sporophila* seedeaters, also have an “eclipse” plumage (e.g., Howell and Webb 1995).

The attention given to geographic variation is often a good indication of the overall quality of a family guide. It was nice to see an appendix showing Red Crossbill flight calls, but variation in other accounts was not treated as fully. The term “Hepburn’s” Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch encompasses three races that breed in Alaska, but although the guide includes these three races it does not acknowledge this widely used term. The book’s introduction (p. 7) states that “we mention named subspecies if they occur north of Mexico and note general trends of variation,” but this is not always true. For example, the photos show two distinct subspecies of the Yellow Grosbeak (including *aurantiacus*, unrecorded north of southern Mexico), but neither is labeled as such, and the text does not discuss geographic variation in this species. The only information given (p. 47) states that “*P. chrysogaster* of South America is considered conspecific by some authors.” The reader is thus forced to seek other sources to discern why the two male Yellow Grosbeaks look so different.

Tanagers, Cardinals, and Finches covers a beautiful group of birds captured in nice photos. Unfortunately, the accompanying text is disappointing and missed an opportunity to discuss and elucidate many points. A modern-style identification guide for these birds is still needed.

LITERATURE CITED

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