

Farmland Birds Across the World

Edited by W. Van der Weijden, P. Terwan, and A. Guldmond. 2010. Foundation Centre for Agriculture and Environment, Box 62, 4100 AB Culemborg, The Netherlands. 138 pages. 24 EUR, Cloth.

Several years ago, during a May bird count, my companion and driver suddenly sped up and said "Let us boot it through this desert." We had just left a riparian habitat where we had found several unusual species. We were now in open farmland and the only species we saw were House Sparrows. This coloured my view point for many years. Indeed I have found little diversity in Canada's vast acres of uni-crops – wheat, canola, flax, tobacco etc. Ranch land was always much better.

This new book brings a scientific, objective viewpoint to the importance of farmlands to birds. Be prepared to read a lot of statistical information, very important to a clear understanding. The authors include ALL farmlands in their analysis. They consider any type of farming from slash and burn to rice paddies, open range and coffee plantations. They include various methods of farming; conventional, crop rotation to organic. The results are surprising.

It seems that many birds have become dependant on farmland for at least part of their existence. Some birds have evolved as agriculture evolved to co-exist with humans. Indeed I find it odd to see some species like swallows nesting in cliffs and other wild places. This does not detract from the problem of lower species diversity in farm lands. However this book shows that some forms of farmland are far more bird-friendly than Canadian wheatfields. I was impressed by the list of species that use rice fields, for example.

This book identifies six basic types of farmland and devotes a chapter to each. The reader can find the distribution of each type along with the principle crop. The species that are affected are covered in a generic fashion, while specific species that have suffered or benefited are covered in vignette boxes. For example, the issues with the expanding goose population in Canada and elsewhere and the loss of Eurasian Skylarks

are treated this way. Within each type the authors evaluate the differing methods of cultivation. Data from organic and conventional farms, for example, showed that the density for about half the species studied was higher on organic farms. As well the total abundance of all species was higher too. Similarly the cultivation systems for coffee and cacao are compared and a vignette box explains the role of the Black-throated Blue Warbler.

This book extremely well laid out. Clearly a lot of thought has gone into the design and this has made it easy to use. It is very well illustrated too. Examples of farmland and farming operations are depicted, allowing the reader to get a better sense of the nature of the farm type. There are many photos of the birds being discussed; beautiful, frame-filling artistic photos of fascinating birds. Where appropriate maps, charts and drawings are included.

It has been estimated that the numbers of all common birds has dropped by about 10% in the last 20 years, whereas the common farmland birds have declined by a whopping 50% in the same period. It is clear that formerly "common" farmland birds continue to decrease because of the effects of changing agricultural practices. While we cannot ignore the need for expanding and more efficient methods of providing food for the growing population, this book will give a better, more reasoned basis for the farming choices we will have to make.

This is an excellent, book that was fun to read, while raising some difficult and important issues. The global perspective is enlightening. You can buy it for pictures, but do not miss reading the text.

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The Eagle Watchers: Observing and Conserving Raptors Around the World

Edited by Ruth E. Tingay and Todd E. Katzner. 2010. Comstock Publishing Associates, a division of Cornell University Press, Sage House, 512 East State Street, Ithaca, New York 14850. 234 pages. \$29.95 USD. Cloth.

There are academic ornithologists who do research and supervise graduate students, and there are avian field biologists. Of them all, the raptor researchers seem to be the most passionate, bold and fearless. Not least of the proof must be the hazards of raptor research such as gaining access to raptor nests and the young in them. Invariably the nests are on cliffs, sometimes with crumbling stone, or at the top of 30 metre high trees. On arrival at the nest, it is usually so wide and deep the climber needs to be an acrobat even to see into it. Handling raptors safely requires skill, strength and protection from beaks accustomed to tearing off

mammal heads, and from talons which rip open guts with nonchalance. These hazards are obviously not the primary reasons why the devotees are so attached to their subjects. So it must be the graceful flying, the majesty, and the assured behaviour exhibited by the birds which are at the top of their food chain. It is that position in the food chain which makes them so vulnerable to local extinction when their prey is contaminated, such as consuming drugged cattle in India.

In the preface the editors write that the book is an "anthology of tales by people who study eagles in the wild". The first long chapter establishes eagle diversity,

ecology and conservation efforts. Each of the following 25 chapters of “The Eagle Watchers” is by a researcher about their specific raptor and describes a particular event during their work. Every chapter starts with a page showing the principal statistics of the species, including its conservation status, followed by a brief biography and a photo of the researcher. It is unfortunate that the black-and-white photos are too poorly printed to identify the person or even distinguish whether they are male or female! Then follows the writer’s essay on their memorable research encounter with their eagle. The essays vary in length from 5 to 14 pages. The authors mostly live in the countries where their research eagles are found, having turned their passion into their livelihood, and many of the researchers spent at least a short period at Hawk Mountain in Pennsylvania gaining experience. Profits stemming from the book sales will go to Hawk Mountain.

More than one chapter speculates on the reason for “cainism” – the siblicide when there is a second chick in some species, but there are no firm conclusions. A

new behaviour by eagles has been attacking hang gliders – the gliders are fragile enough without this problem! Eagle deaths by wind turbines have been mitigated by pre-consultation on situating wind farms away from known eagle habitat and migration paths. And in The Karoo, South Africa, electricity pylons have been redesigned to deter eagles from perching and nesting. It seems that eagles perching on the pylons were causing electrical failure when their liquid faeces created an arc. Now who could have foreseen that?

One would have expected an index in an academic publication, let alone ensuring identifiable photographs. The small number of colour photos of eagles are fairly good. The target reader for the book would be a researcher in a different discipline or different bird species who needs a world-wide summary of some research and salient facts about eagles.

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Identifying Land Snails and Slugs in Canada

By F. Wayne Grimm, Robert G. Forsyth, Frederick W. Schueller, and Aleta Karstad. 2010. Published by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA), 975 Boulevard St Joseph, Gatineau, Quebec, J8Z 1W8. 168 pages. No charge, call 1-800-442-2342 to order.

There is perhaps no more important development in the popularization of an organism group among both the general public and the scientific community than the publication of a well-designed and useful field guide. Accurate and user-friendly publications of this type have the opportunity to greatly expand the ranks of land snail enthusiasts, both amateur and professional alike and publication of field guides for these charming if underappreciated animals are too few and far between. I especially looked forward to the publication of *Identifying Land Snails and Slugs in Canada* by Grimm, Forsyth, Schueller and Karstad since I am familiar with the remarkable illustration skills of Aleta Karstad. In addition, Canada represents an excellent opportunity to generate a reliable, public-friendly guide to these organisms, given the fauna represents a manageable number (slightly less than 200) of native or naturalized species.

Unfortunately, *Identifying Land Snails and Slugs in Canada* does not rise to the challenge, and I fear it may do more to confound new malacologists than to aid them. Part of the problem is the fact that the book’s title and mandate do not match. While the title suggests that this will be a guide to allow identification of the entire Canadian fauna, its species-level content on identification, biology, and ecology is limited to alien (and potential agricultural pest) species in the country. As a result, it is not possible to identify the native species that make up approximately 80% of the Canadian fauna. Even the reliable identification of some alien species will not be easy to accomplish,

as comparison to native species is sometimes required.

Second, high quality images of representative species for each included genera are available only for slugs and those snails with shell diameters generally greater than 1 cm. All of the smaller taxa are represented by rather crude line drawings (at least in comparison to the magnificent slug figures), apparently lifted whole from Forsyth’s *Land Snails of British Columbia*. This is highly unfortunate, as these small species make up approximately two-thirds of the Canadian terrestrial gastropod fauna, and typically well more than 90% of the individuals from any given site. Given the availability of hardware and software to allow fully focused full-color visible light microscopic images of tiny shells, and the presence of a superb biological illustrator among the authors, it is unfortunate to see the most common size class of Canadian land snails be given such short shrift.

Third, the generic level taxonomic keys do not appear to reliably allow for accurate assignment of individuals to the genus level. My expertise is in the pupillid land snails, and I found the keys to not work well for this group. For instance, some Canadian *Vertigo* species that lack apertural lamella/denticles (e.g. *V. aff. genesi*, *V. modesta ultima*) are forced in the key to the genus *Columella*. Also, albino *Vertigo* individuals (common within some *V. modesta* populations) will be forced into the genus *Gastrocopta*. The most common *Pupilla* from the Canadian arctic (*P. aff. pratensis*) is forced into the genus *Columella* because it does not possess a thickened callus in the aperture.