

## DENDROICA – An Aid to Identifying North American Birds

In May 2010 three Government agencies Environment Canada, CONABIO and the USGS launched a new bird identification website, Dendroica. Environment Canada is a Canadian agency charged with protecting the environment, conserving the country's natural heritage and providing weather and environmental predictions. CONABIO [Comisión nacional para el conocimiento y uso de la biodiversidad or National Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity is a permanent inter-ministerial commission of the Federal Mexican government. Established to coordinate, support and undertake projects related to biodiversity within Mexico and the surrounding region. The USGS [U.S. Geological Survey] is a civilian mapping agency in the natural sciences [water, earth, and biological science] The USGS collects, monitors, analyzes, and provides scientific understanding about natural resource conditions, issues, and problems.

The new site is at <http://www.natureinstruct.org/dendroica/> and you must register to be able to use the site. Registration is free and simple, requiring a minimum of information. Once you have received your password it is easy to access the site. Clicking on the Canada bar I reached a list of 436 species. This is far short of the 630 recorded in Canada. As the default setting excludes the rare and non-breeding birds I later changed the filter to include to these. This adds in the likes of Phainopepla and White Wagtail and raised list to 569.

I started by using the default settings. As I was about to visit Calgary, I decided to scroll to Baird's Sparrow. This took me to a page that had four examples of songs, four photos and a range map. By clicking on each song button I heard about ten to sixty seconds of song. The range map is full screen and depicts all of America, north and south. I next tried Brewer's Sparrow that carried 10 songs, three images and a map.

Scrolling through the birds listed it is easy to see that it primarily nesting birds, not visitors. For example, Leach's Storm-Petrel is included but not Wilson's Storm-Petrel [a common summer visitor]. However, the Siberian Tit, recorded as a rare nester in the Northern Yukon, is not on the list. Ross's Gull is listed and has a small dot, indicating breeding, at Churchill, MB, where the current yearly breeding status is unclear. There is no mark to show breeding at Penny Strait in Nunavut.

After I changed to include the rarities and visitors Wilson's Storm-Petrel was added, but the Siberian Tit was still missing. Similarly there is a page for Mew

Gull but no entry for Common Gull. It was obvious that many rarities were missing from albatross [A Yellow-nosed Albatross was recently found at Kingston, Ontario, and I have seen several Black-footed Albatross off British Columbia] to Brambling. The list does contain introduced birds from Mountain Quail to European Goldfinch.

How good is the site? First, it is an easy site to use and the response to changes is very rapid. I found the examples of songs to be excellent. All the ones I tried were technically clear and gave a good representation of the variety of song types. The photos ranged from good to fabulous, with most being very good. The range maps were fine and I could scroll in to get better detail for Canada. There is no text so there is no indication that Eskimo Curlew is extinct, for example.

This a site in development so there are quite a number of inconsistencies. Many pages have items missing. For example, there is no photo or range map for Bar-tailed Godwit or Temminck's Stint, no songs for Little Gull and no map for Sooty Grouse. These are to be expected in a young site and I am sure will change. If you have good photos of Bar-tailed Godwit, Temminck's Stint or any of those missing you can get them added, with credit.

There are some odd discrepancies that are harder to fathom. The Little Gull range map entry shows it as resident on both coasts but no nesting sites, but Black-headed Gull page is correct. For Rock Pigeon, European Starling, House Sparrow, Eurasian Collared Dove, Grey Partridge, and Pheasant there is a range map, but it is blank. However the Chukar map is fine. The Mute Swan range map shows only Michigan and Illinois and not eastern NA, where it is so abundant that at least one state has initiated a cull. But the biggest irregularity is the photo of Sharp-tailed Sandpiper in the Stilt Sandpiper group and the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper section shows pictures of Stilt Sandpipers, but no Sharp-tail!

Despite these deficits I thought this site was very useful. For my purpose [reviewing some Alberta birds] I found it slightly easier to work with the filters on. It has more examples of song than the Cornell Lab site [<http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/search>] and more [better?] photos and is slightly easier to use. I believe this will be my new "go-to" site, particularly for song. I am certain it will only get better.

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