

Book Reviews

ZOOLOGY

The Birder's Companion

By Stephen Moss. 2007. Firefly Books Ltd., 66 Leek Crescent, Richmond Hill, Ontario L4B 1H1 Canada. 208 pages. U.S. \$16.95

This book is an entry in the “everything you ever wanted to know about birds” category. Each of its ten chapters deals with some aspect of birds – where do birds live? How do birds eat? Where do birds go? And, yes, each chapter does consist of a series of questions and answers – over 450 in all – together with side-bars giving what can best be described as “gee-whiz” facts relevant to the chapter’s topic, all in roughly 20 pages or less each.

Maybe a disclaimer is appropriate at this point – this kind of book turns me off. With that out of the way, Moss has done a creditable job in amassing a formidable series of facts and presenting them in a simple, colloquial style. In the introduction the author quotes a friend who suggests the book would appeal to “intelligent, inquiring eleven-year-old boys”, and while the author clearly hopes to appeal to a much wider audience, he makes no apology for his approach.

In spite of its disarming level of simplicity, the book is very well thought-out, up-to-date, and quite accurate. I imagine I could find an error or two in all this mass of data if I tried hard enough, but the fact remains that I didn't. He even – glory be – gives the correct origin for the word “jizz”, with no inanities about “general impression of size and shape” usually parroted as the origin nowadays. My main quarrel with the text is the inevitably high level of simplification, which constantly left me feeling “yes, but...” Some of the author's generalizations seemed very broad, and I wondered how he arrived at them; but again the ones I could check seemed within reasonable bounds.

The author is British, and this can sometimes be a problem when writing for a North American audience.

Birds of the Dominican Republic and Haiti

By Steven Latta, Christopher Rimmer, Allan Keith, James Wiley, Herbert Raffaele, Kent McFarland, Eladio Fernandez. Princeton Field Guides, Princeton University Press. 2006. 258 pages. U.S. \$35.

Hispaniola, the second largest island in the Caribbean, has a wealth of habitats and of birds, making it an emerging destination for birdwatchers. It also has immense development challenges, most acutely felt in Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere.

However, in this case the book is very carefully tailored to North America. One minor area where it could be misleading was in references to “buzzards”, the European name for *Buteo* hawks, but also a term colloquially used in parts of North America for vultures. Not only are we not told what buzzards are, but there are no buzzards in the index. One reference, to them being eaten by the European Eagle Owl [also not in the index]; was a particularly poor choice, given that Great Horned Owls will attack Red-tailed Hawks similarly.

The weaknesses in the index are by no means confined to these two examples. It seems to place most of its emphasis on the material in the side-bars, and the text as a whole is far less well covered. This is particularly unfortunate because for me, at least, this is not a book to read from cover to cover, but is best dipped into from time to time, as some topic of interest arises. For such uses, a thorough index is very important.

There is a one-page bibliography, although again some transatlantic emphasis creeps in, as many of the references are British – it's hard to see the relevance of the UK breeding bird atlas – but more importantly they may be hard to find on this continent. The line illustrations are not one of the strengths of the book.

My carping aside, this book would appeal to novice birders or anyone with a mild interest in birds. Its appeal to more experienced birders is perhaps more limited, but it's an easy read, best taken in small doses, and you'll probably find some things you didn't know. And I seriously think it could be a very good gift for intelligent, inquiring eleven-year-olds.

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These development challenges translate into conservation challenges, putting Hispaniola's ecological richness at peril. This book, the latest in several Caribbean guides issued by Princeton, is thus doubly important, both as an aid to identifying the island's birds, but also as a valuable conservation tool which maps the current avian diversity of the island and communicates the value and beauty of the island's birds to local populations.