

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.

The book will be instantly familiar to anyone who has seen any of Princeton's earlier Caribbean guides, such as *A guide to the birds of the West Indies* by Raffaele et al. Indeed, some of the plates have been taken from that earlier guide. The book follows a standard format, with front pieces speaking to the topography and habitats of the island (from the highest mountains in the Caribbean, at 3098 m, to the lowest lake, at 44 m below sea level), endemic species (31) and subspecies (50), avian conservation, and the island's ornithological history. This is followed by detailed species accounts with information on similar species, vocalizations, habitat preferences, status, nesting, and global range, as well as a "comments" section containing interesting anecdotes such as the place of the bird in local culture. Each species account is accompanied by an up-to-date, detailed map of the bird's distribution on the island. This information is complemented by 56 colour plates, most of which group up to 10 similar species however, pride of place is given to the island's endemic species and one endemic family (Palmchat), which merit larger portraits. The book closes with descriptions of 14 birding sites and a checklist.

The species accounts are accurate and provide sufficient information to identify most species. Particular attention is paid to the resident species most likely to be of interest to visitors, thus ensuring that one is indeed able to safely differentiate Long-billed and Narrow-billed Todys, the vireos, and other potentially confusing groups. Canadian readers will find the discussion of Bicknell's Thrush of interest as Hispaniola is the chief wintering ground of this enigmatic breeding species. In general, the treatment of migrants is better than in many other regional guides; while you might want to lug around a good North American guide for some of the shorebirds and basic plumaged warblers, the level of detail in the plates is impressive and will usually suffice (e.g. if you look closely you can see the differently marked tertials in the illustrations of Long-billed and Short-billed dowitchers). In general the plates have the rather washed out and sombre tones of the earlier Princeton guides, and in some of the portraits the feathers have a rather messy look, not unlike old museum specimens, but this is a stylistic quibble; on the whole the plates are very good. While the deci-

sion to illustrate all 306 species which have been recorded on the island has considerable merit, having three illustrations of a bird which has only occurred once (Swainson's Hawk) would seem an inappropriate use of always scarce space.

The authors largely follow standard taxonomy, but have jumped the gun on American Ornithologists' Union orthodoxy by accepting recently proposed revisions, such as treating the Hispaniolan Nightjar as distinct from the Cuban Nightjar, both traditionally combined as one species known as Greater Antillean Nightjar (confusingly, the latter name is used in the similar species account under Least Pauraque, one of relatively few editorial errors in the book). Similarly, the authors have abolished the names of two endemics, Green-tailed Ground-Warbler and White-winged Warbler which have now morphed into Green-tailed Ground-Tanager and Hispaniolan Highland-Tanager, respectively. Some other incipient splits and lumps are suggested in the text, reflecting the fact that yet more work needs to be done on the island. Likewise, the species accounts indicate that several species have been added to the island's avifauna in the last decade, suggesting a recent increase in coverage and the possibility that the island's bird list will grow: the local occurrence of several pelagic species in particular seems to be poorly known.

Who should buy this book? Someone with a general interest in Caribbean birds may be better served by *A guide to the Birds of the West Indies* by Raffaele et al., which covers Hispaniola along with the rest of the islands. But anyone planning to travel to this beautiful island, or with a keen interest in Caribbean ornithology, would be well advised to acquire a copy; the range maps and site guides alone are worth the price if you are planning a self-guided visit (but better still, go with one of the organizations cited in the book). Finally, and most importantly, there should be a copy in every school and public library on the island: one hopes that Spanish and French versions are in the works.

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Atlas of Bird Migration – Tracing the Great Journeys of the World's Birds

Edited by J. Elphick. 2007. Firefly Books Ltd., 66 Leek Crescent, Richmond Hill, Ontario L4B 1H1 Canada. 176 pages. \$35.

Firefly Books has come out with another decent book. They've claimed the target audience to be, "bird enthusiasts, naturalists and the inquiring reader" and those who "wish to comprehend the perilous voyages that constitute one of the great wonders of the natural world." The book is written to be consumable by peo-

ple in grade school and perhaps almost fully understood by those as young as 12 or 14 years of age; it will be an enjoyable, and not too taxing to read for adults who have a passing interest in the topic. Serious birders will want to go elsewhere for more in-depth descriptions of the topics.

The book starts out with 15 two-to-four page chapters on the biology and environmental conditions of migration, including timing, flight styles, genetics and weather. For the most part, these are well-illustrated