

included amphibians and reptiles in his *Zoology of New York* in 1842. Almost 100 years later (in 1941) it received the most through state monograph on a single group, the *Salamanders of New York* by Sherman Bishop, Rochester, New York. Bishop followed this with a handbook to all North American salamanders. Others included, in the first half of the 1900s, Raymond Ditmars, New York, who wrote immensely popular and influential books on reptiles of North America and of the world and, Albert and Anna Wright, Ithaca, who used local studies to produce the first comprehensive data on the life histories of eastern North American frogs and toads then went on to produce North American handbooks to frogs and toads in 1933, revised in 1942 and 1949, and to snakes in 1957.

The six authors who finally have filled the need for a field guide are also New York state residents, scattered among universities, conservation departments and organizations: Gibbs at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science, Syracuse; Breisch at the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Albany, Ducey at the State University of New York at Cortland, Johnson at the State University of New York at Potsdam, and Bothner at St. Bonaventure University, Olean. The late John L. Behler (1933-2006) was with the Wildlife Conservation Society, Bronx. The distributional data are from the Amphibians and Reptile Atlas Project of the New York Department of Environmental Conservation which compiled 59 000 reports submitted by 1800 volunteers. The atlas also included 28 000 pre-1990 records from museums, field notes, graduate theses, and published literature.

The text covers 69 native species (18 salamanders, 14 frogs and toads, 17 turtles, 3 lizards and 17 snakes), and includes 65 distribution maps (ranges shaded, but without spot localities) and 72 colour plates (each with one to four superior, sharp photographs of pattern and life stage variants contributed by over 30 photographers). Each species account is headed with English and Scientific names followed by sections on Quick Identification, Description, Habitat, Natural History, Status and Distribution, and Other Intriguing Facts. Statements are referenced to a 39-page Literature Cited section. Many leading Canadian herpetologists are cited, among them classical studies by J. P. Bogart on ambystomid salamanders and R. J. Brooks on Snapping and Wood tur-

tles (both at University of Guelph), M. Berrill on pesticide effects and declines (Trent University), J. Gilhen on Nova Scotia species (Nova Scotia Museum), D. M. Green on hybridization in toads (McGill University), P. J. Weatherhead, K. A. Prior, and G. Blouin-Demers on Rat Snakes (Carleton University, Environment Canada, and Ottawa University, respectively).

But the text is not just species accounts. A brief introduction summarizes the history of state herpetology and stresses the conservation theme found throughout the book. It is followed by a discussion of the state herpetofauna with a table giving, for each species, its New York Natural Heritage Program State Rank, NatureServe Global Rank, and (where applicable) its New York State and Federal Listings, exotic species sometimes reported (alligators in the sewers of New York City and beyond) and similarities and differences between amphibians and reptiles. There is a chapter on New York's environment as habitat for amphibians and reptiles with maps of ecological zones, of major lakes and rivers, of counties and major cities, and "land cover". The ecological zones are described with representative habitat photos and a table of all species and habitat types they occur in. Final chapters are Threats outlining the effects of historic overexploitation (particularly commercial harvest) and habitat loss over time, acid rain, contaminants, disease and deformities. Following chapters discuss legal protection, habitat conservation guidelines, conservation case studies, finding and studying amphibians and reptiles, folklore, and epilogue. Appendices cover the "Herp Atlas" Survey Card, and Resources (organizations and identification and general reference). A Glossary covers terms from amplexus to wetland, followed by Literature Cited and a 20-page index.

Eastern Canadian naturalists will find this book a must for their bookshelves as an excellent reference not just to the species included (species that occur in eastern Canada are also in New York) but also for conservation approaches and philosophy. It lacks only a section on care of captives, and that, I suspect, is not an oversight but deliberate, making a strong statement by its omission.

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Extreme Birds

By D. Couzens. 2008. Firefly Books Ltd., 66 Leek Crescent, Richmond Hill ON L4B 1H1. 281 pages. 45 CAD Cloth.

When *Extreme Birds* arrived in the mail, it caught my attention with its dramatic, somewhat comical, cover photograph of a Shoebill. I started to nose through, looking first at the remarkable photographs, and wondering who might review this book. Then the chapter titles made me take a second look and I was

hooked! I expected widest wingspan, smallest bird, longest bill and so on, but heaviest testes, biggest belly and smelliest bird took me by surprise. In the author's view the malodorous claimant is the Crested Auklet. These cute beasts are said to emit a potent, tangerine-like stink that carries for miles. I am afraid I missed that pleasure last year when we sailed by their colonies; there is an advantage or disadvantage to having a poor sense of smell.

This book not only covers the record individual characteristics, like largest and smallest, but includes three other categories. *Extreme Ability* covers such performance heights as fastest swimmer, best flock coordination and best mimic. *Extreme behaviour* describes the strangest incubation, the loveliest display and the best drummer. Finally *Extreme families* documents the limits of courtship, promiscuity and breeding.

Many of the author's choices will not surprise the ardent birder. The widest wingspan belongs to the Wandering Albatross. The biggest eyes [5 cm] are in the head of an Ostrich and the smallest bird is a Bee Hummingbird [5.7 cm]. So the little hummer could almost squeeze into an ostrich eye. Although the choices are obvious, the author tucks in many fascinating details. The ostrich eye is as big as an eye can be, or diffraction would cause problems. It would take 3000 Bee Hummingbird eggs to equal the weight of one ostrich.

I did not realize there was a poisonous bird, the Hooded Pitohui of New Guinea. Apparently this bird absorbs batrachotoxin alkaloids from the Choresine beetles it eats. This toxin is also found in some poison-dart frogs and believed to come from their diet too.

Under the title "Classiest Colours" Couzens gives an excellent discussion of the feather colour of a turaco. This genus is the only one to make green pigment [other "green" birds use refracted light to give the impression of green] and the author covers the process in simple and elegant language.

For the whitest bird he chooses an Ivory Gull, not what came to my mind. I would say several egrets are good contenders, but my choice would be the Snow Petrel. Not only are these little birds bright white, but they have a beautiful sheen that gives them a special glow. Perhaps they did not "win" this category as the Great Egret is cited for the best grooming aids [its powder down and pectinated, comb toe] while the Snow Petrel gets the "Most relaxed attitude to breeding."

Cranes: A Natural History of a Bird in Crisis

By Janice M. Hughes. 2008. Firefly Books Ltd. 66 Leek Crescent, Richmond Hill, Ontario L4B 1H1 Canada. 256 pages. 45 CAD Cloth.

Firefly Books produces well-illustrated nature books featuring larger format, glossy paper, and generally readable text. Cranes are exciting birds, and they have captured mankind's imagination for millennia, so they make good subjects for a book of this character. It is written by Janice Hughes, an Associate Professor at Lakehead University.

With a title like *Cranes* one might expect the subtitle to refer to a "Family in Crisis" but in fact the "Bird" referred to is the Whooping Crane, and despite the emphasis on the dust jacket on cranes as a group, two-thirds of the text is devoted to the history of this one species. Chapters one and six cover the family as a whole, the first outlining their natural history, and the

However the Barn Swallow gets two citations as "Sexiest tail" and "Canniest false alarm."

The author often chooses one species, but the same remarks can be made of others in the genus. The longest legs are not confined to the Lesser Flamingo but are characteristic of all flamingos. Similarly at least the Variable Pitohui and the Brown Pitohui [there are six in the genus] are poisonous as well as the Hooded Pitohui. Indeed Blue-capped Ifritas carry the same toxin.

The photos, one for each species, come from professional stock companies. Therefore they are superb. It is futile to try and pick the best ones, but those that caught my attention were Lesser Spotted Eagle [so majestic], Clarke's Nutcracker [so homely], Western Capercaillie [so haughty] and the Barn Owl [such a beautiful bird]. The photo of the Red-crowned Crane is so artistic it could be a Japanese woodcut by Hokusai or Hiroshige.

I usually read bird books to learn something. While this is a pleasurable act, the primary focus is not amusement, but information. I read this book because it is fun. Even when I knew the facts, such as the Emperor Penguin's unbelievable fast, I enjoyed this author's version of the tale. It was even better when I was learning something new, like the Great Crested Grebe's passion for eating its own feathers. So if you want to know the biggest, the fastest, the smallest, best nest builders, weirdest matings and who dives the deepest or flies the highest, then this is the book for you. Even non-birder trivia fans will get great enjoyment.

Oh yes, and the heaviest testes [8% of its body mass and heavier than its brain] record is held by the Alpine Accentor. For good reason too, but you really should read the book to find out why! And then there is the bird that f*rts to catch its food – but that is another story.

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second profiles of the 15 species. Perhaps appropriately, the natural history section includes extensive coverage of the species' relationship to man, starting with a section on mythology, folklore and cultural importance, and concluding with demographics and threats, and crane conservation. In chapter 6 each species is assigned two pages in a smaller type-face, including a range map and a rather small [~3x5 inch] picture.

Chapters 2 through 5 chronicle, first the decline of the Whooping Crane, followed by accounts of its recovery, discussing in turn the bird's population and migration, and concluding with a summing-up. Because the threats to cranes are mentioned in a number of sections, there tends to be some repetition of material. Two appendices provide the World Conservation Union ratings of crane status, and wild Whooping Crane peak winter counts from 1938-1971.