

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 Iffrits 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\*cks 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.

I was rather disappointed by the book, mainly because the Whooping Crane sections are so dominant in it that I had a feeling the rest of the species were almost an after-thought. The family is a rather homogeneous one, so treating the natural history of the birds as a group is reasonable, but the two-page summaries are just that – summaries – and the illustrations in them are inadequate given the scope and size of the book. In fact, the pictures in general are not up to the standard one expects from a book of this type. Many of the ones in my copy are a little off, lacking sharpness, and some are no more than cropped versions of pictures that appear earlier.

The text is rather uneven. Some parts are rather plodding. The author lapses periodically into jargon and then, for those who might not understand, pops in a

brief explanation. Why use the term in the first place? At its best, however, it is well-written, even eloquent, especially in sections discussing the plight of cranes. The Whooping Crane history is given in considerable detail, even to the extent of outlining the events leading to the formation of the Audubon movement.

Those seeking a comprehensive treatment of the world's cranes will find this book wanting. If you are interested in the fascinating account of the collapse and gradual recovery of the Whooping Crane in North America, coupled with an overview of cranes generally, then this could be a good book to acquire.

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### Marine Mammals of the Pacific Northwest: A Concise and Comprehensive Waterproof Guide

By P. A. Folkens. 2001. Harbour Publishing, P.O. Box 219, Madeira Park, British Columbia V0N 2H0. 8 pages. 9.95 CAD – (synthetic film).

The increasing development of the whale-watching industry has resulted in the demand for, and creation of, books and identification guides for sea mammals, seabirds and the marine ecosystem. In this regard, and looking back on a history of whale-watching for over 90 years, the coast of British Columbia has received most of the publication activity in Canada.

Despite its catchy title, this guide by Pieter Arend Folkens is more a leaflet of a guide. It consists of three text pages and five pages of drawings and photos full of information for the whale watcher in the field. Although the leaflet is printed on “waterproof, UV resistant synthetic film made from a 100% recyclable, environmentally inert material containing no forest products (similar to milk jugs)”, the user might actually have difficulties using it on an offshore whale watching trip during periods of stronger wind or higher waves; the light leaflet could easily fly away and the small print is hard to read when on a rolling boat. However, the compressed text gives a nice summary and overview on 31 sea mammal species in the area; it even mentions Steller's Sea Cow, which was hunted to extinction by 1768. In addition, major whale watching locations in British Columbia and Alaska are named, but none are reported really for Oregon and Washington (as the title would imply).

Most of the eight pages of the field guide are devoted to drawings and to fine pictures from the author and several others. The reader might find the distinction between *Mysticetes* (Baleen Whales), *Odontocetes* (Toothed Whales) and Small Cetaceans a little unclear from the arrangements of the drawings. Very helpful and informative is the page about “Common visible behaviours and terms” allowing to link sea mammal sightings to a classified set of behaviour types. Helpful also is that images of fluke displays are presented for species that are known to show such a behaviour.

Even the body sizes of newborn sea mammals are given. All measurements are made in SI units, and the conversion factor for feet is provided.

Of interest to the general audience might be the section “Marine Mammal Watching Guidelines”, also presented on the web <http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/protectedresources/mmvviewingguide.html> (Note that the old URL [www.nmfs.gov/prot\\_res.html](http://www.nmfs.gov/prot_res.html) and given in the guide was updated). In addition, contact addresses and a web address (revised to <http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/protectedresources/strandings.htm>) are given for sightings of stranded sea mammals (Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 800 4654336; or the Whale Reporting & Stranding Line 800 665 5939).

As found in many other field guides, the text suggests some field marks and details for species identification and separation that normal whale watchers might not be able to apply, or which are not really realistic. For instance, Sei Whales are supposed to be differentiated from Fin Whales by a fin angle of over 45 degrees; male Beaked Whales (genus *Mesoplodon*) ideally can be identified by the location of teeth and jaw line (which is for most of the time covered by the ocean); phocids (true seals) differ from otariids (Sea Lions and Fur Seals) by their hair and small nails on their foreflippers. Overall, features like these might be very hard to recognize for the untrained as well as for the trained observer, particularly when observations are done for moving animals, from a shaky boat far away and with binoculars. Rather than focussing on classical small-scale features, outlining the use of proportions and shapes could be more useful for telling species apart. Counterproductive for a field guide might be the point that Beaked Whales, the species group that lacks most knowledge on distribution and where whale watchers could indeed contribute greatly to science, are described as the “most difficult whales to identify correctly”; no further help or details are given for the interested whale watcher. For my taste, the “Habitat and Symbol Keys” that are supposed “to