

The Stokes Field Guide to the Birds of North America

By Donald W. Stokes and Lillian Q. Stokes. 2010. Little, Brown and Company, New York, New York. 792 pages. \$24.99 USD.

Donald and Lillian Stokes have carved themselves a special niche in the bird field guide world: they specialize in producing field guides that use photos of birds rather than drawings, such as the Sibley guide (2000). The Stokes guide, however, is not just a bunch of bird photos; it's a carefully designed guide that will aid birders in the field regardless of experience level.

The Stokes guide has an informative introduction, with sections on how to use the guide, key to the species accounts, how to interpret the range maps, and basic bird exterior anatomy. The species accounts make up the bulk of the book. The accounts are grouped in colour-coded sections; as you flip through the coded page bottom, the group names appear: "Curlew", "Flycatcher", "Thrasher", "Falcon", and so forth. It's a very handy feature.

The introduction states that the range maps are the most up-to-date, when compared to other guides, and include the American Birding Association's rarity rating code for each species and known wild hybrids. The scientific names and common name conventions are up-to-date and reflect recent taxonomic revisions.

The 854 species accounts are laid out to aid the birder in the field, with the photographs and range maps all on the same pages. The accounts contain all the information needed when in the field, such as the shape of the bird, various seasonal morph and age descriptions, subspecies information, hybrids, what the bird looks like in flight, the habitat it occupies, differences between males and females, and what the voice sounds like. Included with the guide is a CD that has more than 600 songs and sounds of 150 birds. A headphone

symbol at the end of the account informs the reader that the bird's voice is included in the CD.

The more than 3,400 photographs are all in colour (except for some of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker [*Campephilus principalis*] photos which are black-and-white; one is colourized) with the birds facing to the right. I was sceptical when I first encountered the Stokes guide series several years ago (I had the *Stokes Field Guide to Birds: Western Region* [1996] that I bought in 1997), wondering how someone could identify a bird using photos alone, since photos are only snapshots in time, reflecting age, feather patterns, and general condition at the moment the photo was taken. Certainly, a generalized image was needed that illustrated what the typical bird in the field should look like, as purported by the Peterson bird guide (2008). However, as I examined the photos selected for the Stokes Guide, I was impressed with the quality of the photos used to represent the birds a wildlife observer may encounter in the field. In most cases, several photos are included, such as the juvenile form, summer and winter forms, males and females, and for some birds, the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd year forms. Each photo even has a state abbreviation next to it noting where the bird was photographed, aiding in regional differences. However, some photos are not as good as they could be, such as the photo of the Black Swift (*Cypseloides niger*), page 413. No feather details can be discerned and it is basically a black silhouette. However, when I showed the photo to another biologist, he mentioned that because this species is such a rapid flier, the key identification feature needed is the general shape, i.e., the

slightly notched tail and finely pointed wings. Keeping these comments in mind, the photo indeed adequately includes these points and I would guess an observer could identify a Black Swift if using this guide in the field. I am sure photographing such a fast flying bird is a challenge as well.

Other features in the guide include a glossary, key to state, province, and international location codes, and an index. Folded in the front cover is a quick alphabetical index. For some bird groups that are difficult to identify and tell apart, such as the gulls, a special identification tip section is included (i.e., page 289).

Overall *The Stokes Field Guide to the Birds of North America* will serve well the naturalist and wildlife observer that prefers photos over drawings. The Guide is said to be the most up-to-date guide currently available and includes all the latest high-interest rarities

(back cover). This alone makes it a worthwhile volume to have. Dimension-wise, it is not a small guide (22 × 15 × 5 cm), but smaller than some (i.e., Sibley 2000; 25 × 16 × 4 cm), and is rather heavy (1.36 kg), however do not let size hold you back on picking up a copy; it is a very useful guide and with bird watching as popular as ever, it is a good guide to have in your wildlife library.

Literature Cited

- Peterson, R. T. 2008. Peterson Field Guide to Birds of North America. Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, New York.
Sibley, D. A. 2000. The Sibley Guide to Birds. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, New York.
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