

Book Reviews

Book Review Editor's Note: We are continuing to use the current currency codes. Thus Canadian dollars are CAD, U.S. dollars are USD, Euros are EUR, China Yuan Remimbi are CNY, Australian dollars are AUD and so on.

Editor's Note. The address of the Birds of Northumberland County website has been changed to <http://www.willowbeachfieldnaturalists.org/Northumberland-County>. This is part of the Willow Beach Field Naturalists' website, but the URL above will take you directly to the Birds of Northumberland County. Please note that the URL is case sensitive. From Clive Goodwin.

ZOOLOGY

How to be a Better Birder

By Derek Lovitch. 2012. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540 USA. 192 pages. 19.95 USD. Paper.

Derek Lovitch has produced a useful volume that focuses on modern ways to become an effective birder and to bird with a purpose. He uses technology and common sense to find birds – including rare birds, like vagrants and overshoots. His mantra is the “whole bird and more” – a simple approach that is certain to help the modern birder enjoy birding while at the same time fulfil a variety of birding goals.

The book is divided into nine chapters, each focusing on a specific aspect of the “whole bird and more” approach: (1) Advanced Field Identification, (2) Birding by Habitat, (3) Birding with Geography, (4) Birding and Weather, (5) Birding at Night, (6) Birding with a Purpose, (7) Vagrants, (8) A New Jersey Case Study, and (9) Patch Listing. In addition to these chapters are five pages of references and a complete index.

A quick review of these chapters will give the reader a general idea of what Lovitch is getting at. Birding is more than getting out to a wild or semi-wild area with a field guide and binoculars in hand. Sure, you will see some birds, but the key is to be an effective birder. With our busy lifestyle, getting the most out of a birding field trip is a goal that can be easily reached by using the tips detailed in the book. For example, birds occupy certain types of habitats and a quick study of habitats and what kinds of birds to expect will make the birding experience that much richer. Understanding the basic natural history and ecology of your target bird is also important. Other tools include checking the geography of a particular area and studying weather patterns. These two go hand in hand. Certain land features attract birds more so than others, such as islands and peninsulas, especially during “fallout” events during migration. Studying the weather the night before (such as viewing NEXRAD Doppler radar on the Internet) will also allow the birder to predict where birds are likely to be found the next day – especially if there are strong winds and rain events. Having the perfect

storm in relation to ideal land features during bird migration has the potential to make a birding field trip very productive. Lovitch explains how to do this very well and points the reader to several useful websites and other resources; the possibility of finding rarities is real and reading these chapters alone make the book worth having.

Lovitch does not just focus on rarities and vagrants. He also wants birders to study the common species. He wants the “watching” part of bird watching to make a comeback. All too often the race to “get that bird” on a list becomes the goal while the enjoyment of seeing the birds in the first place is lost. I can relate to this, because I often hear fellow birders dismiss the common species as they scan an area. Comments such as, “Oh, never mind, it is just a coot” is rather commonplace. Lovitch suggests taking a good hard look at the common species, and really study how individuals differ from one another, and fully understanding the nuances of colour, shape, and where they occur on the landscape.

I enjoyed the last chapter the most. Lovitch talks about visiting a habitat patch and keeping a list of birds observed there. Set a goal of the number of species you want to see and stick to it. The patch should be within a few miles of where you live, easy to get to, small enough to thoroughly survey, but also have several habitat types to attract a variety of birds. Once your goal is met, move onto another patch. I have two patches that I keep track of – my backyard and a local flood control basin down the street. Having these patches nearby keeps me birding even with a busy schedule. These patch study exercises also are useful when participating in several citizen science projects, such as Christmas bird counts, backyard bird counts, and breeding bird surveys. Entering your bird sightings, no matter how humdrum, into eBird is something that everyone should get into the habit of doing. Entering

your data into eBird will provide essential information for regional studies as well as a variety of other applications.

How to be a better birder is a quick read and an important addition to a birder's education. Oftentimes easily accessed tools such as weather websites, topographic maps, blogs, and other resources are not taken advantage of by birders. The tips and methods discussed at length in the book take out much of the guess

work in finding a variety of birds on the landscape, including rarities and vagrants. The best part however, is getting out and having fun. Birding is not about getting birds on a list; it is about enjoying birds and seeing them in the wild. Use Lovitch's book as a launching pad to get out and bird with a purpose.

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