

## Tanagers, Cardinals, and Finches of the United States and Canada

By D. Beadle and J. Rising. 2006. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540 USA 196 pages, U.S.\$29.95 Paper.

The authors use 200 selected photographs to complement text covering the biology, identification, molts, song and distribution of the tanagers, cardinals, and finches found north of Mexico. In all, forty-six species are covered. Of these, one is an introduced species and 31 are native residents of some part of North America. The remaining 14 are vagrants with five as Alaska specials and seven creeping north over the southern border.

I have just spent a couple of hours resolving an identification issue using about 20 photographs off the Internet (out of the 200 I found there) of a single species. Most of those photos were of limited use. Normally I find such photographs less useful than artwork because they are so influenced by light, angle and the condition of the specimen. However, my jaundiced eye is very impressed with the photographs in this book. I do believe that I would be able to separate female House and Purple finches using the photographs and text given in this book. Indeed I used this book to confirm that I had correctly identified a Hoary Redpoll I saw recently in the Arctic. The typical resident species are represented by several photographs taken at different angles thus giving the reader a better understanding of the bird.

The 31 residents each have a range map giving summer, winter, and permanent ranges. These are about 5.5 cm square and very readable and useful. There is a written description of range too, which adds more detail. I had no difficulty deciding I was at the northern edge of my Hoary Redpoll's range. The text is clear and provides great detail without wasted words.

The vagrants are similarly treated, but do not have a range map. Under distribution their normal range (outside of North America) is described, followed by a summary of their occurrence in North America, with additional details, such as precise locations and dates, where warranted.

This is a very useful supplementary guide (to the classical all-species field guides) for providing additional information on this group of birds. It is conveniently sized to carry in the field and will be especially useful in sorting out look-alikes such as Hoary and Common redpolls. It provides carefully organized and well-presented information to those who wish to learn more about these birds than is given in the typical field guide. This is the type of book that makes a most welcome present!

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## Wheatears of Palaearctic: Ecology, Behaviour and Evolution of the Genus *Oenanthe*

By E. N. Panov. Pensoft, Sofia, Moscow. 439 pages, U.S. \$167.50

Wheatears are the quintessential Afro-Eurasian bird. Found anywhere there is open ground, the more desolate the better, wheatears make ideal subjects for ornithological study; indeed, according to the author they are among the most studied groups of passerines. They are easy to see and follow, they exhibit interesting behaviours, and, as a group, pose many riddles. How can up to four species with seemingly identical foraging behaviours co-exist in a relatively inhospitable habitat? Why in some species is there high sexual dimorphism and in others virtually none? What light can this group renowned for intra-species variation shed on the nature of polymorphism and its evolutionary origins? What are the advantages of a contrasty black and white plumage? How did one species of this desert loving family break through the oh so inhospitable for wheatears boreal forest to successfully colonize much of the Arctic including not once but twice in North America?

These and other questions are copiously answered in this book by E. N. Panov, a Russian scientist with a passion for this intriguing group. The book is divided into two parts, the first dealing with general features of wheatear biology, the latter providing detailed monographs on individual species or superspecies found in Eurasia. Between them, these sections cover

every conceivable angle on wheatears, from the geographic distribution and origins of the group in its entirety through habitats, movements, social behaviour, reproductive behaviour to predators and parasites. Each monograph follows a template covering systematics, distribution, behaviour, nesting, and movements. The book is extensively illustrated with black and white sketches illustrating everything from behaviours, nest sites to plumage variations and is amply provided with sonograms, family trees, graphs and maps illustrating key points. There is also a section of 40 colour plates showcasing the array of arid habitats so beloved of the genus, portraits of selected species, and at least one picture of one being devoured by a snake. The book closes with a 14-page bibliography and an index helpfully divided into a general subject index as well as an index of animal names.

There are about twenty species of wheatear, with the exact number hard to pinpoint because of blurry lines with other turdidae such as saxicola ("stone-chats") and uncertainty about the taxonomy of several closely related taxa. Taxonomic and genetic evidence suggests that the genus had its origins in Africa, where it may have emerged from an ancestor shared with redstarts. The large amount of variation and frequent contact zones within the genus suggest that there is an ongoing evolutionary process. The English name, which comes from the old English for white rump,