

The Birds of Manitoba

Edited by Peter Taylor, illustrated by Rudolf Koes. 2003. Manitoba Avian Research Committee, Manitoba Naturalists Society, 401-63 Albert Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba. 500+ pages. Hard cover \$63.95

The *Birds of Manitoba* is one more of the many regional texts on North American birds, specialized productions that keep getting better. With *The Birds of Manitoba* we have evidence that years of systematic observation by dedicated birders and ornithologists have borne a bounty. The authors of *Birds of Manitoba* have achieved their stated goals of telling you where and when to see the birds of Manitoba, their overall populations, and the likelihood of your having a sighting, and, finally, estimated population trends and distribution patterns. Assumptions are backed up by reams of data collected over twenty plus years; a base from which *Birds of Manitoba* can report authoritatively on the ebb and flow of bird populations as the ecology of Manitoba changes.

The book starts with thumbnail outlines of the province's birding hot spots. They are well written but lacking in those workday details that birders like – concise directions on how to get there. But this is a minor criticism that pales in comparison to other true loves of birders: beautiful bird paintings and wonderful black-and-white sketches. As well as being finely crafted, many of the paintings are educational tools. They enable one to compare similar looking species if confronted by them in the field.

Following the summaries of the hot spots is a more extensive section that provides an overview of the history of ornithology in Manitoba. It outlines the people and the places that make up the ornithological landscape of Manitoba and points to changes in avifauna and their effects on bird populations. *Birds of Manitoba* mentions that Winnipeg anomaly of more House Sparrows reported in that city in the middle of winter than anywhere else in North America.

Other interesting overviews in *Birds of Manitoba* outline the relationships between physical geography and bird distribution, Manitoba ecology and bird habitats, and the effects of manmade changes on bird populations and bird behaviour.

The main body of the text revolves around the species accounts arranged in taxonomical order, an ordering of the bird species by a set of criteria which is now changing because of DNA analysis. These changes have as yet not made a difference in what the birder sees with the naked eye only to what the ornithologist notes in the laboratory.

The species accounts of the 382 birds known to occur in Manitoba start at Loons and end at Old World Sparrows. The best known representative of the Old World Sparrow family is the House Sparrow. It is deftly dealt with. A concise description of what it looks like is followed by a jaundiced history of this bird in North America. It is seen as a pest by *Birds of Manitoba*. However, it is not seen as declining in Manitoba as it is suspected to be in other jurisdictions.

One of the pressures on the House Sparrow is the expansion of the House Finch from the east coast inland, a factor that is noted in the species account on House Finch in *Birds of Manitoba*. Another avian pressure on the House Sparrow is the southern expansion of another species, not a competitor for nesting sites, but a predator – the Merlin. As with the House Finch, the chronicle of the Merlin in *Birds of Manitoba* points out that the Merlin's expansion requires even better documentation to properly determine its population numbers province wide. *Birds of Manitoba* mentions that Merlins do not normally make their own nesting sites but depend on abandoned crow or magpie nests. So the web that may ultimately affect House Sparrow numbers must encompass the corvid family.

The word sketch of the American Crow provides more information which one can use to speculate on the future of the House Sparrow in urban Manitoba. In this case, the authors sense that the Breeding Bird Surveys which point to a long-term decrease in crow population go against what other observers find. So while it is not the stated intention of *Birds of Manitoba* to document the interlocking relationships between bird species, you can use this book to do so.

Similarly, *Birds of Manitoba* is not a field guide. Nevertheless, it has a number of little gems of explanation. The description of what to look for if you ever happen upon a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is priceless.

As a birder I have grown used to identifying birds by their jizz, that gestalt of shape, form and telltale behaviour patterns of each different species of bird. *Birds of Manitoba* has a jizz. Its style hearkens back to the writing of Bent and the paintings of Audubon, times when observational skills were a joy to gain and respected for their own sake.

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