

Birds of Eastern North America: A Photographic Guide Birds of Western North America: A Photographic Guide

By Paul Sterry and Brian E. Small. 2009. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540-5237 USA. 336 pages (Eastern) and 416 pages (Western), 18.95 USD each, Paper.

There was a time when field guides to North American birds were few and far between. No longer. It seems that every year there is a new entrant into the field guide sweepstakes, with Sterry and Small launching the most recent contender. This review in fact concerns itself with two very similar books, one oriented to the West, the other to the East. Moreover, these are members of a new wave of photographic guides in which the paintings of old are replaced by ever better photos. At first glance, the two volumes are highly attractive books, lavishly illustrated and with superior production values, an impression that largely, but not entirely, remains upon greater familiarity.

The two volumes are twins, sharing the same format, and, where species overlap, the same or very similar text and photos. They consist of the requisite introductory sections followed by species accounts. The introductions touch on the usual items: how to use the book, bird topography, a glossary of terms, tips on bird habitats, and so on. I particularly liked the fact that the tips included a section on urban habitats, which are, after all, where most birders are when not birding! The species accounts follow the taxonomic sequence currently in vogue (starting with waterfowl, not loons) and include plumage descriptions, with subsections on distinctive plumages, where appropriate, followed by sections on voice, status, and habitat, finishing up with an innovative snippet providing observation tips. A few have a “similar species” section where, confusingly, extralimital species are described (confusingly, as other books use this heading to deal with regularly occurring lookalikes). The species accounts are rounded out by crisp, easy-to-read range maps. One advantage of being the latest entry is that recent taxonomic changes are reflected: this is one of the first guides to treat Cackling Goose adequately.

But what about the photos? One of my pet peeves is photographic guides with minuscule dark, grainy photos. No such problem here. The large, bright photos have excellent colour reproduction. Another peeve: guides with just one image of the species. Again, no such problem here. Where distinct plumages exist, there are multiple images; for example, there are eight photographs of Laughing Gull. My third and final peeve: plates in which it is hard to tell which bird belongs to which image. Again, no such problem. Each image is well delineated, so there is little room for confusion. The detail provided and the range of images mean that these volumes will help their target audience, birders, sort out what birds they have seen. This holds for easy-to-identify species but also for the more difficult identifications. A good litmus test for a

North American guide is the treatment of immature dowitchers, a relatively tough identification, but one made easy with the right tools. This book passes that particular test with flying colours, as the distinctively different tertial patterns are easily visible.

There are faults. The division into two volumes, East and West, has resulted in a few oddities; indeed, exactly where the continental divide is remains unclear. Thus, Carolina Chickadee, not usually considered a western bird, shows up in that volume. Similarly, Bewick’s Swan, rare enough on the west coast, mysteriously makes an appearance in the eastern volume. To confuse things further, the range maps are the same in both books, showing all of North America. The final pages of each volume have a section on oddities, wherein are grouped various vagrants and escapees, a good idea, but it seems odd to include here Common Ringed Plover, which breeds in the area covered. Similarly it seems odd to relegate Bicknell’s Thrush to a section on similar species under Gray-cheeked Thrush. While the inclusion of observation tips for each species is a good move, some of the tips are perhaps less than helpful. For example, the fact that Snowy Owls are white does not make them particularly easy to pick out in a snow-covered field. Likewise, neophytes might wonder why the “easiest to locate by imitating their song” Northern Saw-whet Owl is not responding, as the authors neglect to mention that this works only at night. And you could hike dozens of boulder-strewn rivers in the northeast without ever seeing a Harlequin Duck. And, while on the subject of ducks, Barrow’s Goldeneye—said to favour arctic lakes—is a species of wooded ponds in Canada. Some of these faults may have been caused by confusions between East and West (for example, patrolling rocky rivers in the northwest might well produce a Harlequin Duck).

As noted earlier, the selection and presentation of photos are generally good, but there are shortcomings. For example, some of the flight shots of raptors are too shaded underneath. Poor choices have been made in some cases. For example, the only photo of a Cory’s Shearwater shows the dorsal side, and this makes it look like an all-dark shearwater, when in fact it is gleaming white underneath. A particular pitfall of photographic guides is that photos are (literally) snapshots in time. The disadvantages of this are apparent in the photos of adult winter Western and Semipalmated sandpipers, which were taken at very different times in their moult sequence. In shorebirds, a few weeks make a big difference, thus the images are not particularly comparable. Similarly, the in-flight shots of

the three accipiters have each one holding its tail in a different way, and this makes it hard to see the differences which are so useful in field identification. There are also some outright mistakes. Ones that I caught tended to be mislabeled photographs: in the eastern volume, the first winter Iceland Gull is actually a second-year bird, the first summer Common Tern is mislabeled as an adult summer (although the same photo is correctly labelled in the western volume), and an immature Yellow-billed Cuckoo is mislabeled as an adult. The range maps are good, but also not

without fault, for example, the Ontario range of Gray Partridge is incorrect.

With the proliferation of options, choosing a good field guide is increasingly a question of personal preference. Most of my casual birder friends prefer photographic guides; most keen birders seem to prefer traditional guides with paintings. I would recommend this book for novice birders and for those wanting to supplement a more traditional guide.

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A Photographic Guide to the Birds of Jamaica

By Ann Hayes-Sutton, Audrey Downer, and Robert Sutton. 2009. Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540-5237 USA. 304 pages, 29.95 USD Paper.

In 1990, Sutton and Downer produced a well-received, handy little photographic guide to the birds of Jamaica. Almost 20 years later, a more comprehensive guide, copiously populated with stunning photographs taken by Yves-Jacques Rey-Millet, makes for a fitting replacement and a fitting tribute to Robert Sutton and Audrey Downer, both of whom sadly passed away before the book was published.

The book follows a well-trodden path, with an introductory section providing a biogeography of the island and observations on the composition and origins of the avifauna and on migration, including austral and altitudinal migrants. There are notes on conservation and threats, a history of ornithology on the island, and a section on birding in Jamaica, including short site notes. This is followed by the obligatory “how to use this guide” section, and there are end pieces, including a section hopefully entitled “probably” extinct species, as well as an annotated list of vagrants and charts highlighting endemic species and subspecies.

As is the norm, the bulk of the book consists of species accounts. Each account includes the often colourful local names and a short taxonomy of the species, followed by a detailed description and discussion of similar species, voice, and, for the visiting birder, an all-important section on habitat and behaviour—usually the keys to finding birds. Each species account is accompanied by a colourful, easy-to-read range map. The most attractive aspect of the book is the photographs. The number of photographs of each species varies, with residents being awarded more extensive coverage, up to four photographs, compared to migrants, which generally have one or two only. For the resident species, all the most likely plumages to be

encountered are illustrated. This bias makes sense, as most users of this book will concentrate on the charismatic local resident species, which include 30 endemics, as the other species are well covered in any standard North American guide. The quality of the photographs is generally excellent; the plates of Jamaican Tody alone are an incentive to start planning your next trip. And then there is the photo of an adult Northern Potoo with a downy white nestling: “When alarmed the chick gradually melds into the parent’s feathers, until totally concealed.” Now that would be something to witness. Of particular interest to North American birders is a good photograph of the enigmatic Bicknell’s Thrush, a hard-to-see northern breeder which winters in Jamaica.

The editing and quality control are excellent. The only slip-up I found was an end piece photograph of a White-chinned Thrush unhelpfully labelled only as “adult”, with the reader left to guess what species was involved, a problem easily solved by flipping through the species accounts. A minor quibble: there is a lack of in-flight shots of gulls, shorebirds, and ducks, and this reduces the ability of the book to meet its stated objective to be an all-in-one field guide.

This handy little volume is the only guide you need in order to identify all of the resident birds of Jamaica, along with most migrants you are likely to see. It is also an excellent photographic complement to any of the standard Caribbean regional field guides. The photographs alone make this a handsome addition to any birder’s library. I would highly recommend it to anyone with an interest in Caribbean birds and birding.

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