

## BOOK REVIEWS

Siberian flycatchers and small Old World thrushes (Wheatear, etc.) are beautiful additions, but expanded coverage of plumage variation in the newly split Solitary Vireo complex would have been infinitely more useful for 99% or more of potential users. Alternatively, take a look at some new plates. The Mourning and White-winged doves are lost among a mass of vagrants and exotics (checking the maps helps narrow down choices in such cases). Among the albatrosses, images of the two regularly occurring species (Black-footed and Laysan) are tiny, while most of the next plate is devoted to large images of two vagrant albatrosses. It is nice to have information on all of these species, but for many birders such comprehensiveness may not equate to comprehension. Instead, the recent albeit misnamed American Bird Conservancy's field guide to *All the Birds* (despite some poor plates) or the last (1994) Golden Guide for eastern North America (with plates by Jim Coe that are among the best ever painted of many North American birds) may be more useful and user-friendly to many birders. In addition, for all but the most widely traveled and vagrant-oriented birders, David Sibley's forthcoming North American field guide (due in 2000) should relegate NG3 to a lower ranking. Had NGS taken more time with its revision this might not have been the case.

When it first appeared, the NGS guide was an ambitious undertaking. It has improved with each revision, and the most serious birders will want NG3. Greater consistency in the illustrations and their printing, more attention to some of the commoner species, and perhaps a layout that more easily distinguishes vagrants from regular species would be things to consider in future editions, or in any other North American guide. Despite some misgivings, I consider NG3 an excellent guide and am glad it exists. I recommend it for its wealth of information, its up-to-date distributional data, and the relatively comprehensive level of plumages it illustrates.

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**Habitat Characteristics of Some Passerine Birds in Western North American Taiga**, by Brina Kessel, 1998. University of Alaska Press. 120 pages, 9 color plates, 13 black and white photos. Paper, \$16.95. ISBN 0-912006-98-6.

This short monograph is a welcome contribution to the study of Alaska ornithology, particularly since so little information has been published on use of habitats by passerines in the region. The title is misleading, though, for the book is not a comprehensive treatise on habitats across western North American taiga. Rather, it reports primarily on the results of a two-summer study of a single drainage in central Alaska. The information is augmented by comparisons with earlier studies by the author and other ornithologists from different sites in Alaska. Nonetheless, considering the paucity of data on this group of birds in Alaska, the work constitutes a valuable reference and review of current information on passerine breeding habitats in Alaska's taiga.

Taiga is defined as the subarctic forested region of the northern hemisphere, encompassing not only forests but also the mosaic of open woodlands, shrublands, wetlands, bogs, and alpine tundra within the forested zone. The author takes a Grinnellian approach to identifying the major environmental factors that help define the species-specific niches of taiga birds in Alaska. In her study, she censused breeding birds on twelve 10-ha plots selected to represent fairly homogeneous tracts of each of the major habitats described for Alaska's taiga. She systematically measured the characteristics and vegetation of each plot in detail, then used correlation and cluster analysis to discern relationships between breeding densities of selected passerines and characteristics of the various habitat types.

The format of the book is a hybrid between a traditional scientific research publication and a less formal overview, perhaps in order to appeal to a broader

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audience. The introductory chapters provide an interesting discussion of taiga habitats as well as more technical descriptions of the study plots. Black and white photographs show aerial and close-up views of most of the habitats. The methods section is followed by a series of annotated accounts for 15 of the most common passerines recorded. Each account summarized the habitat variables strongly correlated with breeding density, briefly discusses differences among plots, and compares results with those from other studies in Alaska. Short concluding chapters discuss the use of habitats by various thrushes, the high productivity of forests of black cottonwood, and the relative stability in avian use of spruce forests. Most of the data are summarized in tabular form, although a dendrogram displays results of the cluster analysis for habitat similarity among 22 species. Appealing photographs of 15 of the most common birds provide an aesthetic touch.

Overall, the volume was well edited. I found a single typo in one of the tables, in which the rows of data were not aligned correctly. The short introductory and concluding chapters were written clearly and integrate ideas of interest to both general and technical readers. The species accounts are more difficult to digest because of the plethora of numbers and codes for habitat variables embedded in the text.

As a descriptive work of habitat use by passerines in Alaska this study is valuable. Analytically, however, there are some weaknesses, which the author acknowledges at least in part. Study plots were selected nonrandomly, and each habitat was represented by only a single plot. The author attempts to correct for this problem by examining relationships between bird detection and habitat characteristics at the subplot level, a classic case of pseudo-replication. One other statistical weakness is the use of a series of bivariate correlations between bird densities and individual habitat variables rather than a multivariate analysis. With over 40 habitat variables and only 12 plots, some spurious relationships would likely emerge. In a few instances the author fell prey to the common tendency in such correlative studies to infer cause-effect relationships with insufficient data. The author compensates for these analytical weaknesses by drawing upon other studies from across the region to confirm or temper the patterns from this study. In this, her 40 years of experience in Alaska ornithology and broad knowledge of the species' ecology are significant assets.

This small, attractive volume is a useful reference for the growing number of ornithologists studying passerines in taiga or boreal forests. It would also be a helpful technical reference for anyone studying the 15 species treated in detail, the Gray Jay (*Perisoreus canadensis*), Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*), four thrushes (*Catharus minimus*, *C. ustulatus*, *C. guttatus*, *Ixoreus naevius*), the Arctic Warbler (*Phylloscopus borealis*), three New World warblers (*Dendroica coronata*, *D. striata*, *Wilsonia pusilla*), and five sparrows (*Spizella arborea*, *Passerculus sandwichensis*, *Passerella iliaca*, *Zonotrichia leucophrys*, *Junco hyemalis*). Resource managers would find useful the clear summary tables as well as the more general introductory and concluding chapters on taiga habitats. Anyone interested in northern birds in general or in the ecological question of niche partitioning should find some intriguing nuggets of thought in this book.

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