

BOOK REVIEWS

For an undertaking this immense and complex, I found surprisingly few points to quibble about. Most of my criticisms concern cases in which the images shown are either at odds with, or are not explained by, the narration or text. For example, narration concerning the extent of black in the wingtips of adult Mew and Ring-billed Gulls accompanies a photo caption stating “white in wingtip,” while comparison of “adult and 1st-winter” Black-legged Kittiwakes accompanies photos captioned “adult” and “1st-alternate.” On the images of the Kamchatka (*Larus canus kamtschatschensis*) and Common (*L. c. canus*) Mew Gulls presented, I was unable to discern a clear difference in primary pattern, even though the narration stated that the “white wedge that separates the gray bases from the black distal portions of the central primaries” in the Kamchatka is supposedly lacking in the Common. Images of a leucistic Heermann’s Gull were not labeled as such and were shown during narration concerning the species’ breeding range, while an adult Ring-billed Gull with a dark eye was labeled as such but was not discussed at all in the narration. I applaud the number of images, and the amount of discussion, of unusual variation in this video, but showing such images without explanation may result in confusion for some viewers. In a few cases, attempts to illustrate a narrative point failed visually because the image did not clearly show the character in question. For example, one of the two composite images comparing the relative sizes of the white primary tips of adult Mew and Ring-billed Gulls failed to show the difference described. The addition of date and location to some cuts is very welcome, but I suggest these data be mandatory for all cuts and photos, not simply some. Similar criticisms were pointed out in a review of *The Large Gulls* (*Western Birds* 29:480–481), and future installments in this series might address these points more fully.

I was curious as to why two species, the Gray (*L. modestus*) and Band-tailed (*L. belcheri*) gulls, were not even mentioned in the video. Because both are so rare on this continent, and because some may question the origin of the individuals that have occurred in North America, I can understand why neither had its own species account. Both pose potential identification problems, however (with the Heermann’s and Black-tailed Gull, respectively), and some mention of these potential identification issues should have been made.

Because of the length of the video and the incredible amount of information it contains, even the most experienced “larophile” will have to sift through *The Small Gulls* a little at a time, over and over again. However, this video is not merely a “gull encyclopedia,” a reference to be opened only when one has a question concerning a certain plumage or character. Beginning birders will benefit from watching (albeit in small bites) the species accounts, both to gain an appreciation for variability within species and to begin building the knowledge necessary to distinguish them. Producer John Vanderpoel and the writers of both of these gull identification volumes are to be commended for producing that rarest of bird identification materials: something that appeals to the most avid fanatic while bringing the identification of these extremely tricky birds within the grasp of beginning birders. Anyone even remotely interested in gull identification should own both of these videos.

Stephen C. Rottenborn

Owls: A Guide to Owls of the World, by Claus König, Friedhelm Weick, and Jan-Hendrik Becking. 1999. Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, CT. 320 pp., 64 color plates. Hardback \$50.00. ISBN 0-300-07920-6.

This latest in the Yale/Pica series (hereafter *Owls*) treats 212 species of owls: 18 of Tytonidae (barn owls) and 194 of Strigidae (typical owls). These figures compare with 16 and 189 species recognized by Bruce (1999) and Marks et al. (1999), respectively, in volume five of the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* (hereafter *HBW5*); these discrepancies reflect taxonomic differences of opinion. The introduction to *Owls*

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includes short sections on the layout of the book, an overview of owls, and an invited chapter on molecular evolution and systematics by Michael Wink and Petra Heidrich. The color plates (by Weick) show many adult plumages, including subspecies and morphs, and a selection of nestlings and juveniles. Species accounts include headings for identification, vocalizations, distribution, movements, habitat, descriptions, measurements, geographic variation, habits, food, breeding, and status and conservation.

The introductory overview summarizes morphology, behavior, vocalizations, and taxonomy. A glossary would be useful given the number of relatively technical terms used for anatomy and molecular biology. Also, the term "mesoptile" is used on the plate captions for nestlings, although no discussion of plumage development (or molt) is included in the introduction.

The authors note (p. 33) that "owl vocalizations are poorly treated in bird books," but they do not always improve this situation. Most voice descriptions for North and Middle American species appear to have been transcribed from commercial tapes (notably Hardy et al. 1989). The vocal repertoires described are thus somewhat limited, and more detail for some species, such as the Unspotted Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius ridgwayi*) can be found in regional field guides or on other commercially available tapes (Delaney 1992, Howell and Webb 1995). A few sonograms are used in the introduction, but none is provided in the main text where they would facilitate comparison among problem taxa and similar species.

The invited chapter on systematics presents the results of molecular investigation, apparently without peer review. Nonetheless, I found this chapter a well written and reasonable analysis of genus-level taxonomy, and I appreciated the direct literature citations, which are provided nowhere else in the book. Will the publishers of these family monographs ever include direct citations, or are they and the authors content to compromise the scientific value of their work so seriously? References listed at the end of each species account often appear not to have been used or are miscited; e.g., the range of the Tamaulipas Pygmy-Owl (*Glaucidium sanchezi*) is said to include Veracruz, but whence does this novel information originate?

The acknowledgments laudably credit many scientific institutions but also lead one to conclude that many active field workers in the New World were not involved directly in this project. The authors presumably have field experience in Germany, and apparently in parts of southern South America. Their experience in North and Middle America appears minimal, however, and frequent problems concerning species in these areas are compounded by an inexhaustive literature search. For example, of the *Birds of North America* species accounts, only that for Burrowing Owl (published in 1993) is cited. One would think it useful in an owl monograph to consult prominent references for North American endemics such as those for the Flammulated (1994), Northern Saw-whet (1993), or Spotted (1995) owls.

An example of unfamiliarity with North American geography and literature is the treatment of the "Oaxaca Screech-Owl" (*Otus lambi*) as a full species, apparently on the basis of a comment by Hardy et al. (1989) concerning one case of call playback. The authors of *Owls* seem unaware that *lambi* is generally treated as a race of the Pacific Screech-Owl, *O. cooperi* (e.g., AOU 1998, Binford 1989, Howell and Webb 1995). Instead, they note that *lambi* has been described as a subspecies of *Eastern Screech-Owl* (*O. asio*), and the discussion of similar species does not even mention *cooperi*, despite the mapped range for *lambi* falling completely within that of *cooperi*! In the account for *cooperi*, the only mention of *lambi* is as a similar species distinguished from *cooperi* by its "dark (not barred) crown," a feature not supported by the plate.

The range maps impart a general idea of each species' range but would have benefited from review: e.g., the range attributed to the Cape Pygmy-Owl [*Glaucidium (gnoma) hoskinsi*] is too generous, the ascription of the Northern Pygmy-Owl [G.

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(*gnoma californicum*) to northwestern Mexico is unfounded, and no arrow highlights the Juan Fernández Islands on the map for the Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*). Similarly, the movements section supposedly includes “all movements ... including vagrancy,” but records of the Stygian Owl (*A. stygius*) from Cozumel Island (Howell and Webb 1995) and south Texas (Wright and Wright 1997) are missing.

Presumably the plates are based upon museum skins, and most species are recognizable, although the paintings are not always accurate; e.g., the pygmy-owls on plate 47 all show too many tail bars. Overall, the plates in *Owls* are disappointing: they are rather washed out (owing in part to the printing?) and fail to convey the subtle beauty and life that make owls so appealing. The illustrations of owls in *HBW5* score much higher in terms of accuracy and aesthetic appeal.

To judge from the other errors I found with ease, it appears that a copy editor was not involved in the production. For example, under geographic variation for the Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) (p. 195), the Galapagos race *punctatissima* (suggested as perhaps a separate species) is hidden in the account of the Lesser Antillean *insularis*; on p. 25, “Patagonian Pygmy-Owl” is used for *Glaucidium nanum*, an English name used nowhere else I know of, and not even listed by the authors as an alternative name; the Western Screech-Owl subspecies *xantusi* is misspelled *xanthusi*; references listed at the end of the Tamaulipas Pygmy-Owl account include König (1991, 1994) but in the bibliography one finds König (1991a, 1991b, 1994a, 1994b).

A little more time with research and editing, plus the inclusion of direct citations, could have resulted in an important and useful work. Instead, we are left with another Eurocentric and idiosyncratic family monograph that may be as much hindrance as help to North American birders and ornithologists.

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