

BOOK REVIEWS

Birds of North America, by Kenn Kaufman. 2000. Houghton Mifflin, New York. 384 pages. Paperback, \$20. ISBN 0-395-96464-4.

The year 2000 saw the publication of two completely new field guides to North American birds—the Sibley guide and the Kaufman guide. This simultaneity compels us to draw parallels—but are we comparing apples with apples? Before the details of the Kaufman guide are addressed, some background information should be appreciated. Kaufman is a well-known figure in North American birding circles. His accomplishments include editorship of the sadly short-lived but pioneering journal *Continental Birdlife* (1979–1981) and authorship of numerous publications including the Peterson series *Field Guide to Advanced Birding* (1990). Such associations with the cutting edge of bird identification may have led to certain expectations from his new field guide.

This guide, however, is aimed at entry-level and beginning birdwatchers, that is, anybody. This huge demographic is largely excluded (albeit inadvertently) by most other popular field guides. Excluded? This depends on how one defines a birdwatcher. Kaufman's intent is to enhance appreciation of birds in the general populace, many of whom we, as more advanced practitioners, might not even consider as birdwatchers. Conservation depends ultimately on political decisions, and the greater the public's awareness of birds, the greater the chance for their conservation. Ornithologists constitute a tiny minority that can help bring about conservation of endangered habitats or species. But if *everybody* appreciates birds, at some level, then the grass-roots support for conservation could be monumental. A dream, perhaps, but a worthy one.

Departing from the seminal Peterson field guides, Kaufman chose to use photographs for illustrations. Making the leap from a bird one sees to a field-guide painting is one experienced birders take for granted, but I suspect most people relate more easily to photographs. Really good photographs are not always easy to find, so Kaufman edited photos using a computer and his extensive field experience.

The book is compact (it fits into a back pocket) and arranged in conventional field-guide format. Short introductory sections in user-friendly prose cover birding basics, bird topography, field marks (ten photos of House Finches convey variation more fully than in any other guide with which I am familiar), taxonomy, and geographic distribution. Then come the species accounts, with photos arranged opposite succinct text. Comparable poses were chosen for similar species, when possible, but photos cannot work as well as good paintings to facilitate direct comparisons. Most species are represented by at least two images that help convey differences in posture (useful for beginners) and plumage. Taxonomy and nomenclature, but not sequence, follow the American Ornithologists' Union (through the 2000 supplement to the 1998 checklist). First come ducks, then other swimming birds, aerial waterbirds, birds of prey, chickenlike birds, wading birds, shorebirds, medium-sized landbirds, and finally other landbirds (arranged in seven groupings). One can question why flycatchers or sparrows are not "typical songbirds," but the divisions may be helpful to a beginner. For example, "everybody" knows what a duck is, so that's a good place to start, and then comes the coot—"non-birders" at a local park I visit in my attempts to identify hybrid gulls often ask "what's this black duck?" Give them the National Geographic Society (NGS) guide and see them struggle to even find, let alone identify, an American Coot. The Kaufman guide should get them to this identification on page 2, in the pictorial table of contents.

The very first page has color-coded tabs that help locate a particular group. An important innovation is the pictorial table of contents at the front of the book, as one turns the *first* page. Photos of a selection of species from each group are presented right away, so that someone wanting to identify a bird can get (one hopes) to the right

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group quickly, without wading through introductory text that might frustrate a “non-birder.” The ability to put a name to a bird one sees is a powerful hook, and the pictorial table of contents is a good way to facilitate this step in incipient birders. Each of these groups (ducks, aerial waterbirds, etc.) is introduced in the text by a pictorial section that further narrows the choices and provides background information. Additional information is provided for problem groups: the summary of gulls on pages 68–69 is as helpful and concise as one could wish for a beginner, while the detailed range map (p. 273) for the Black-capped and Carolina chickadees is useful for these commonly seen garden birds.

On the basis of a few random comparisons, the color range maps seem on a par with the NGS for overall accuracy and further discriminate between common and scarce occurrence by different shades. The text for each species opens with a synopsis of abundance, habitats, and habits, followed by field marks, then voice. It seems user-friendly for the intended audience and could also benefit more experienced birders: the Short-tailed Shearwater is “much like Sooty Shearwater, not always identifiable;” or Cassin’s Vireo is “Like a duller version of Blue-headed Vireo; best separated by range. Where they overlap some may not be identifiable.”

Which species are covered? Although not stated in the introduction, it appears that all regularly breeding North American species are included, plus all regular migrants, commoner “vagrants,” and even some very rare vagrants that could be found in gardens or at feeders (e.g., the Green Violet-ear and Fieldfare). Oddballs from Alaska islands and the like are not included.

What of the illustrations, the edited photos? In general these are well chosen, and pointers highlight field marks, but many minor problems pervade the photos, and in some cases their captions. This aspect of the book could have benefited from more thorough review. As examples, juvenile White-tailed Kites don’t have ruby-red eyes, the wing-tips of the perched adult Glaucous-winged Gull look too pale, the wing-tips of the standing adult Western Gull are too short (primaries 8–10 appear to be lacking!), the right-hand illustration of the “Ashy Storm-Petrel” on page 99 is a dead ringer in shape for a Black Storm-Petrel, the wing-tips of the left perched Calliope Hummingbirds fall well short of a strongly graduated tail (rather than falling slightly beyond a more squared tail), the right wing of the center Ruby-crowned Kinglet on p. 287 appears deformed, the “immature” Black-throated Sparrow is actually a juvenile, and so on. While these facts could annoy or irritate more advanced birders, they may not detract from the overall goal of the book. The photos also are a potentially useful resource for more experienced birders, but the fact they’ve been “edited” cautions against their being used too literally.

Most birders you and I know may not need this new guide, but what about the kid next door, or the curious onlookers you attract at the local park? This book has potential for a huge audience, and I congratulate Kaufman for his pioneering spirit and broad-based goals. The back cover proclaims that this guide “cuts through the clutter to focus on the essentials.” I agree, but the success of this guide will be measured by how it works for the intended audience. While I prefer the Sibley Guide and the NGS, I believe the Kaufman guide is more useful for beginning birders or “non birders,” and I suspect we all can learn from this book and its approach to birding.

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