

BOOK REVIEWS

Birds of North America, Western Region, by Fred J. Alsop, III. Smithsonian Handbooks, DK Publishing, New York. Paperback, \$24.95. ISBN 0-7894-7157-4.

"Until now, no tool for identifying birds has also provided access to information on behavior, nesting, flight patterns, and similar birds in a compact and user-friendly format." So proclaims the introduction to *Birds of North America, Western Region* (hereafter BNAW), and that this book is written for novices and for experienced birders. How does it uphold these claims?

The subject matter of BNAW is birds recorded west of the 100th meridian, north of Mexico. A brief introduction explains how to use the book (e.g., the numerous icons), including sections on watching birds and conservation. The introduction is not free of miscues: the "Ruby-throated Hummingbird" photo (p. 13) is of a Plain-capped Starthroat, and in the abundance and distribution terms (pp. 24–25) the European Starling is "abundant," while the Cattle Egret is "exotic," and the Antillean Nighthawk (unknown in the West) is "rare." Single-page accounts follow for 696 species, in the latest AOU sequence. Each has one or two color photos (or paintings), a small color map, and various other information conveyed by text (song, behavior, breeding, nesting, population) or icons (flight pattern, nest identification, habitat). A small box covers similar species. The book concludes with a list of 80 "accidental" species, a glossary, and an index.

I have yet to see an identification guide that works well for all levels. In regard to BNAW, I doubt a beginner wants to wade through many pages of species he will never see in an attempt to identify a bird in his yard. Advanced birders will be frustrated (or amused) by the concept and execution: e.g., criteria for which species are addressed in accounts appear purely whimsical: included are the Streaked (but not Manx) Shearwater, Red-tailed (but not Red-billed) Tropicbird, Great Knot (but not Ruff!), and so on. Illustrations are the crux of any identification guide, yet one full-color photo of a Red-throated Loon or Sanderling in breeding plumage is unlikely to help beginners identify these species during most of the year. Photos generally have been trimmed to the bird's outline, but some retain an unappealing and distracting color outline (e.g., the Great Egret and Baird's Sandpiper), and many are of birds in poses unhelpful for identification. The paintings appear to have come from "professional" design people unfamiliar with avian anatomy or live birds. I didn't search for misidentified photos but the female "Rufous" Hummingbird is a Lucifer, and the White Wagtail is not of the Alaskan subspecies *ocularis*.

The text is of little substantive value for field identification. For other topics (such as behavior and nesting) it contains much that is accurate, but little reflects first-hand experience. An eastern bias is pervasive, and the editing is poor. Equally good or better life-history summaries can be found in *The Birder's Handbook* by Paul Ehrlich et al. (Simon and Schuster, 1988, whence much information in BNAW appears to have been copied directly) or Kenn Kaufman's *Lives of North American Birds* (Houghton Mifflin, 1986). For field-identification use the Sibley, National Geographic Society, or Kaufman guides, which are all excellent, well-conceived, and together cater to the full spectrum of birders. You'd be unlikely to take BNAW afield (it's heavy, at 8.5" × 5.5" × 1.75"), so having two or more useful books at home would be better than having this one.

BNAW appears to be a well-intentioned but poorly executed attempt to combine life-history information with identification. Usually I donate review copies to a library, but in this case I'll recycle my copy when this review is finished.

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