

BOOK REVIEWS

Birds of the Lahontan Valley: A Guide to Nevada's Wetland Oasis, by Graham Chisholm and Larry A. Neel. 2001. University of Nevada Press. 256 pages, 60 illustrations, 5 maps. Paperback, \$21.95. ISBN 0-87417-479-1.

When most people think of Nevada, they imagine either glittering casinos or vast tracts of dry landscape covered with sagebrush. Some western birders might have visions of small, damp patches of green in the gray-and-brown desert, with lost songbirds appearing and disappearing in those migrant traps. Few, however, would realize that 78,000 shorebirds were counted in Nevada's Lahontan Valley in the fall of 1998 or that 6500 White-faced Ibis nested there in 1997. Readers of this book will learn not just these tantalizing tidbits but also a wealth of information about the birds and, to a lesser extent, the geography, geology, botany, and history of one of Nevada's great wetlands.

Birds of the Lahontan Valley has three chapters plus two appendices. The first chapter describes the natural and human history of the valley. The second chapter is the heart of the book and comprises species accounts of birds recorded in the valley. Chapter three provides a brief look at some of the best birding locations in the area. Appendix 1 shows wader and shorebird census data for 1989 through 1999, and appendix 2 lists Christmas Bird Count data for 1985 through 1999.

The introduction states, "the purpose of this book is to bring together the wealth of information that exists on the bird life of the Lahontan Valley." It further asserts that "the species accounts ... build on Ray Alcorn's work ... to provide the first comprehensive review of the Lahontan Valley's avian life. The book provides detailed status, habitat, and seasonal occurrence information for the 297 bird species recorded in the valley." Chisholm and Neel bring strong credentials to these tasks. Chisholm has been a dominant figure in water-rights issues in Nevada for the past decade. He is currently executive director of the Nature Conservancy of California. Neel, staff nongame biologist for the Nevada Division of Wildlife (NDOW), plays an important role in shaping policy for that agency.

The first chapter of this book acquaints the reader with the history, geography, geology, and botany of the valley. Although brief, it provides enough information to satisfy the reader who is looking for an overview—and that is clearly what is intended. You don't have to read very far before you realize that the overriding issue in the Great Basin, as in much of the West, is water. Water issues pervade the entire history of the region.

Of course, chapter one only sets the stage for the main act, the species accounts. For this chapter, the authors researched the older literature, records from *Audubon Field Notes* and *American Birds*, museum specimens, records of the relatively new Nevada Bird Records Committee (NBRC), and the repositories of NDOW and Stillwater National Wildlife Refuge. The authors explain their criteria for records to be included in the text and, for the most part, they appear to follow those criteria. There are a few lapses, though. For example, I'm not sure why the report of 200 Baird's Sandpipers at Stillwater is included, and even the authors state that it is "unlikely." Most records, however, appear to have been carefully selected.

Each species account begins with common name, scientific name, and status. (A few of the scientific names are not quite current, as, for example, the Mountain Chickadee in the genus *Parus*.) The book provides arrival and departure times for migrants (often including documented earliest/latest dates.) Nesting status is described if applicable, as are habitat preferences for many species. For birds that are very localized within the valley, more specific location information is provided. Population status and changes are described for some species and, for introduced birds, the date of first introduction is included when available. Many accounts are complemented by wonderful black-and-

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white drawings by Mimi Hoppe Wolf. (The cover art by Keith Hansen unfortunately seems to have suffered weak color reproduction in the copy I received.)

The accounts are written in a somewhat conversational style. This makes for pleasant reading but is less successful at providing the sightings in a format conducive to future research. Most of the records include the source, which might be a named individual, an issue of *American Birds* or *Audubon Field Notes*, Alcorn's *Birds of Nevada*, various government publications, the NBRC, or some other reference. Some also specify that there is a specimen or photo. However, many records of seemingly equal importance are not attributed to any source. Consider, for example, this report for the Blue Jay. "Alcorn (1988) reported 2 seen (1 collected) 2.4 miles west of Fallon on December 14, 1976 ... In addition, there is a sight record of a wintering Blue Jay in Fernley during the 1987–88 winter." One has to wonder why the latter sight record is not attributed to any source.

Often an account ends with thoughts like "the status of this species needs investigation." Perhaps the greatest strength of this book is its ability to provide the available information while also conveying the need for more study, more birders, more reports. For example, the account for the Black-and-white Warbler lists only one record but states that "this species is probably more common in the valley than the single record indicates"—two Black-and-white Warblers have been recorded in the Lahontan Valley since the book went to press.

Birders visiting the Lahontan Valley should use this book to help them decide which of their sightings should be documented and forwarded to the appropriate person or organization. Unfortunately the book does not specify where records should be sent. Check the website of the NBRC (www.gbbo.org/nbrc.htm), which also includes a link to Nevada's recently published review list. For species not on the review list, but which this book show to be unusual for the Lahontan Valley, submit your sightings to the address shown at www.gbbo.org/submit.htm. These reports will be considered for inclusion in *North American Birds*. Yet another place for reports and discussion of sightings (and other Nevada birding information) is the Nevada list server: see birdingonthe.net/maillinglists/NVBD.html.

The final chapter of the book contains descriptions of several of the best birding sites in the valley. While birders visiting the area will certainly find this section useful, most of these descriptions are quite brief. This is not necessarily a shortcoming of the book. One should purchase this book for the species accounts—the site guide is just a nice little bonus.

If you bird the Great Basin, or are contemplating doing so in the future, you should own *Birds of the Lahontan Valley*. Well-written, informative, and authoritative, it is a book you will consult time and again as you explore the area's surprising wetlands.

Martin Meyers