

BOOK REVIEWS

Wrens, Dippers and Thrashers, by David Brewer, illustrated by Barry MacKay. 2001. Yale University Press, New Haven and London. 272 pages, 32 color plates, numerous maps. Hardback, \$50.00. ISBN 0-300-09059-5.

At that infamous (and apocryphal) meeting in some unnamed British pub a couple of decades back, when the bird families were being divvied up for a series of "identification guides" that would change the birding world as we knew it, somebody wandered in late and got a hodgepodge of little gray and brown birds as his assignment. Without any clear ecological or phylogenetic ties binding the three families that are the subject of this book, the treatment here smacks of this sort of historical accident. Nevertheless, there are few bird families more interesting than the unique, albeit species-poor, dippers (Cinclidae, the most aquatic of the passerines), the socially and vocally fascinating wrens (Troglodytidae), and the marvelous, mimicking Mimidae. A happier approach to this book, and this review, therefore, is that we're granted the bonus of three family accounts rolled into one book.

Originally published in Britain by Christopher Helm, the book covers 83 species of wrens, five dippers, and 36 mockingbirds and thrashers. Also included is the enigmatic "mockingthrush" *Donacobius*, historically viewed as a mimid or wren, but perhaps (according to unpublished dated cited here) closer to the Old World warblers and babblers. This is essentially a guide to New World birds, as only three of the species (a wren and two dippers) breed in the Old World.

An introductory text of 13 pages includes four pages explaining the species accounts, five on classification, relationships, and biogeography (with two full-page maps of species richness for wrens and mimids), a page and a half on conservation issues, and a standard page on bird topography. Some taxonomic treatments differ from those of the A.O.U.; the "Brown-throated Wren" (*Troglodytes brunneicollis*), for example, is split from House Wren (*T. aedon*) on the basis of an isozyme study by Brumfield and Capparella. Traditional generic relationships of wrens appear to require revision, according to unpublished work by F. K. Barker cited in the book.

The species accounts, introduced by brief but helpful accounts of generic characters, are generally fairly thorough, allowing that many species are poorly known. Text sections cover alternative names, identification, description, geographical variation, voice, habitat, habits, status and distribution, breeding, movements, measurements (from published sources or specimen measurements by the author), and references. Well-known or highly variable species (e.g., the Marsh and Winter Wrens) get two to four pages of text treatment, but some tropical or insular wrens get less than a page.

Identification information is sometimes sketchy. For Baja California's endemic Grey (in American English, Gray) Thrasher the identification section assures the reader that the only sympatric thrashers are Le Conte's and Sage, ignoring overlap with California Thrasher and vagrancy of the similar Bendire's Thrasher. Little useful information on separating Brown-throated and Northern House Wrens is provided, and readers are not warned of the considerable reported introgression that complicates field identification at the northern end of the former taxon's range. Behaviors useful in field identification are not always mentioned. For example, the highly distinctive bobbing behavior of the Rock and Canyon Wrens is omitted. Oddly, there is no mention of the wing-flashing display in the Northern Mockingbird account, yet this behavior is implied for the Northern in the accounts of some other species of *Mimus*.

All recognized subspecies are briefly described, along with range summaries; many are illustrated. Subspecies treatments are not always thorough or accurate. The California Thrasher's northern subspecies *sonomae* is described in the text and plate legend as differing from the nominate subspecies in having a "pale chest band," which is a feature not mentioned in Grinnell's original description or ever shown, to my

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knowledge, by the birds themselves. There is no mention of the striking differences in call notes of Pacific and boreal/eastern Winter Wrens within North America.

The range maps are generally useful; the base maps show rivers and national boundaries, as well as state boundaries for Mexico and the USA. One can quibble about the accuracy of some maps. For example, desert and coastal Cactus Wren populations in California are far too separated, the Marsh Wren's breeding range in California is too restricted, and much of Great Basin range of Bewick's Wren is not mapped. Maps of band recoveries for a few migratory species, e.g., the "Eurasian" Dipper and Brown Thrasher, are informative. Distribution discussions generally gloss over or ignore vagrancy; there is no mention, for example, of the occurrence of the Brown Thrasher or Gray Catbird in California (both occur annually), yet California's record of the Blue Mockingbird (not accepted because of doubts about natural occurrence) is mentioned. The text seems to be well edited; one minor lapse I noted was the use of "Rufous" Thrasher for Brown Thrasher in the introduction to the genus *Toxostoma* on p. 229.

Since these "identification guides" are probably used more for easy access to information on distribution and biology (both comparative and for individual taxa) than for identification, it is perhaps not fair to dwell too much on the artwork. Yet such books are ultimately judged, in large measure, by the success of the illustrations. The plates in *Wrens, Dippers and Thrashers* have a number of weaknesses, from organization and figure selection to shapes, postures, and colors; many plates fall well short of the standards expected of the identification guide genre. For starters, a maddening lack of concordance between the position of the facing-page legends and the positions of the figures on the plates continues a problem that has plagued many of these family guides. There seems to be little logic to the plate layouts; positions and postures of individual birds are all different, hampering comparison. I can't help but wonder why the two Bahama Mockingbirds are depicted standing in water; if this is typical behavior, seemingly odd for a mimid, it is not explained in the text.

Similar sympatric species sometimes are not even on same plate; for example, the Sinaloa Wren is two plates removed from the Happy Wren, though the bizarre posture of the only figure of the former (with its head tucked in and bill hidden) makes its depiction close to useless anyway. Often, sex and age classes are mixed among subspecies, making it hard to distinguish subspecies characters from age/sex features. For example, in the Thrush-like Wren on plate 3, the unspotted figure of *unicolor* is of a female, whereas the spotted figures of the nominate bird and *hypostictus* are of males, falsely suggesting at first glance that the species is highly dimorphic sexually.

Many figures are anatomically challenged, especially the wings of certain thrashers (e.g., Cozumel Thrasher, plate 28), and the bill shape and bill/skull relationship in some thrashers and wrens (e.g., some species of *Campylorhynchus* on plate 4). In my copy some plates are far too gray, rendering the Curve-billed and Bendire's Thrashers on plate 29 virtually unrecognizable.

In summary, this "family guide" has a bit of an odd phylogenetic premise to go along with an erratic execution. Collectors of this sort of book will undoubtedly want to obtain it since the text brings together considerable published and some unpublished information; the plates, though somewhat flawed, provide a good overview of a fascinating collection of species. However, a more thorough and better illustrated monograph for each of these three families must still be awaited.

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