

## BOOK REVIEWS

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**The Birdwatcher's Companion to North American Birdlife**, by Christopher W. Leahy. 2004. Princeton University Press. 1039 pages, scattered line illustrations. Hardback. \$39.50. ISBN 0-691-09297-4.

The promotional blurb calls this *Companion* “both a practical handbook for amateurs and a handy reference for seasoned birders.” It is basically a reference manual of eclectic scope that covers topics related to North American birds (north of Mexico), with entries arranged alphabetically. Examples? Try “drake,” “Hutton,” “names, colloquial,” “skimmer,” “wreck,” and “xanthochromatism,” to name but six that my eyes lit upon in a random opening of pages. On page xii, the author explains his two-fold desires in writing such an encyclopedia: to have at his fingertips a book that could answer numerous technical to trivial questions about birds, and a longing for nontechnical accounts of the basic elements of birdlife that could be read for pleasure as well as information. An earlier iteration of the *Companion* was published in 1982, but this 2004 edition is greatly updated and expanded.

Readers may be tempted to dip into the book right away, picking subjects that interest them, or looking for definitions of bird-related words—and this is certainly what I did on opening my copy. But, as with most books, a few minutes reading the introductory material are well spent. The introduction will help readers appreciate the book's layout and refine their search image for information. It notes how broad subjects (e.g., flight, migration, molt) are treated in essay form with the aim of summarizing present knowledge. It lists examples of subjects that readers may not look for because they might not think of them, such as “cats,” “chumming,” “politics, birds in,” and “religion, birds in.” It lists subjects that come under the umbrella of physiology and anatomy (e.g., bursa of Fabricius, ossification, touch); it lists the family-level entries that can be found (albatross, anhinga, auk, etc.); it explains how bird-finding localities are organized; and it discusses other types of entries, such as name definitions and etymology, biographies (for all whose names appear in current scientific or English species names of North American birds), and nouns of assemblage. There is also a brief note on pronunciation (guides to which are provided for potentially unfamiliar words), an explanation of the bibliography, and a list of the appendices.

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Then you're into a wealth of information—hundreds of entries, from “Abbreviations” to “Zygodactyl.” Following these are six appendices, mainly lists and notes on the classification of North American birds. The book ends with a selected bibliography arranged by subject entries in the main text; thus, if you're interested in a specific subject, say, brood parasitism, you can find references to it quickly rather than having to search through the main entry or the whole bibliography.

How does one review such a work? I spent parts of two days leafing through the *Companion*, skipping from subject to subject (the accounts are well cross-referenced), and finding that time had slipped by, an hour here, and an hour there—time far better spent than surfing the Internet for information likely to be less carefully researched and less well written. An example of the writing style: “The auks, cormorants, and some other seabirds tend to be vocally reserved, though many tubenoses are given to weird nocturnal arias during the breeding season” (p. 731). Leahy indeed conveys a wealth of information in an easy, readable manner, so one of the book's objectives has been achieved.

What of content? Well, the *Companion* is a hefty mine of facts, although, like any book in a similar vein, it cannot be truly comprehensive. A work of this nature is pre-disposed to criticism for including some subjects but not others. As a test, a selection of birdwatching friends and I picked subjects we thought to find in the *Companion*, and for which we'd like a handy explanation or discussion. Of 25 terms or subjects, 12 could not be found at a first strike, but four of these were tracked down by looking in related entries (this was before I had read the introduction!). This means that I haven't (yet) found definitions for eight terms, although two of these (Neotropical migrant and stopover) are mentioned, without explanation, in the generally good discussion of migration. These two seem as worthy of inclusion as anachronistic inanities like the “six hundred club.” The other six misses were aspect (as in plumage aspect of the Humphrey-Parkes system), fidelity (and not listed under site or mate), humerals (and not mentioned under wing), monophyletic (and not mentioned in the overview of taxonomy), productivity (related to monitoring bird populations), and riparian (certainly a buzzword in western habitat conservation). Still, the hits amount to about 70% of potential entries being included, which isn't bad. The last omission, riparian, may reflect a slight eastern bias in the *Companion*. For example, among journals listed as containing articles of “continentwide or international interest” we find *British Birds* but not *Western Birds*, and the Cordilleran Flycatcher (rather than the Pacific-slope) is purportedly a speciality of Yosemite (p. 883).

I was surprised to note a few outright errors, such as Northern Wheatears supposedly wintering in southeast Asia (pp. 493, 867; perhaps copied from the 1998 AOU checklist, which conveys the same misinformation). On p. 103, it is said that only the Masked and Blue-footed boobies have sexually dimorphic voices—but it is well known that the Brown Booby shares this trait. And the orbital ring (p. 597) is defined as “identical to an eye ring,” despite the widespread distinction that the former refers to naked skin, the latter to feathering. In particular, Appendix I (checklist of North American birds, ambitiously enumerating subspecies) and Appendix II (checklist of casual and accidental species) are fraught with mistakes that could be corrected in the next printing. Here are some examples I found in a quick scan: Heermann's Gull does not breed off “Baja, California;” species that are *not* monotypic include the Lesser Black-backed Gull, Berylline Hummingbird, California, Canyon, and Spotted (misspelled *maculatus*) towhees; the Eastern Towhee comprises four (not 12) subspecies; the Tamaulipas Crow is monotypic; the Bermuda Petrel has not been recorded off the state of Oregon (!); and the Spoonbill Sandpiper record from British Columbia is overlooked. In a work of this scope, typographical errors are to be expected, but they are uncommon, not rare. More diligent copy-editing would have benefited the final product and remedied nonsensical sentences such as “Sanderlings tend to be comparable to or greater than breeding ranges in extent.” (p. 495). More diligent proofreading would have added page numbers for (presumed) pp. 935–947.

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In conclusion, while experts could quibble over details of their own subjects, the *Companion* offers well-balanced overviews of most topics (e.g., see Problems Involving Birds, especially the last paragraph) and a quick definition of miscellaneous words (now what kind of foot is anisodactyl?). It is a worthwhile addition to the library of anyone with an interest in North American birds. There is something for everyone here but not everything for someone—except perhaps the author, who is to be congratulated on an impressive feat of compilation and literacy.

*Steve N. G. Howell*



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